
10.

OUTWORK YOUR TALENT

“God gives gifts to everyone but that means nothing. It’s what you make of them that counts.”

– Ronaldinho

“If you’re struggling with your shooting, then do other things on the basketball court. Get steals, get assists, get rebounds – do anything on the court to help the team win.”

– Allen Iverson

“If I’m not doing it right, I want coach to tell me so I can fix it.”

– Steph Curry

“Talent is never enough. With a few exceptions, the best players are the hardest workers.”

– Magic Johnson

“Some people want it to happen, some people wish it would happen, successful people make it happen.”

– Michael Jordan

Have you ever thought that you were good enough? Do you ever feel that you have arrived as a player? Do you get frustrated when your coach expects more out of you? Have you ever wondered why teammates or coaches might push you a little harder? Do you think that being on your game or working hard most of the time is acceptable?

Are you okay with having 99% effort? Did you know that if pilots were successful 99% of the time that there would be 24 plane crashes per day? If hospitals were correct 99% of the time when matching up a baby with its' correct parents that roughly 11 babies would be given to the wrong parents each day?

Every day we are faced with the choice of whether we will maximize our talents and potential. Some of us have more talent in certain areas than others. It doesn't matter if you are a third-string player or an all-conference performer, you can still underachieve or overachieve. You can continually decide if you will maximize your talent. Your talent is a starting point. It gives an athlete an opportunity but what you do with it determines the level of success that you and your team experience.

You and your team probably have morning workouts, team film sessions & practice. But guess what? So, does every other team. What are you doing to be different? Every baseball team in America has a leading hitter, a leading fielder and sends out 9 starters for a game. How will you and your team differentiate itself from the competition? How will you outperform yourself and what you think you are capable of? Talent is God-given; Excellence is a choice.

BOSTON RED SOX

Sports Illustrated said that the Boston Red Sox 2004 season was "the Most Amazing Season in History" as they awarded the entire team its' prestigious Sportsmen of the Year honor. All the Red Sox did that year was win the team's first World Series Championship in 86 years. For Boston fans and the Red Sox that was a long drought. The Red Sox won the first ever World Series in 1903 and then won four more before Babe Ruth was traded from Boston to the New York Yankees prior to the 1919 season. Many believed that the "curse of the Bambino" was real since they didn't win another World Series after that ... until 2004.

Not only did the 2004 Red Sox win but they made history doing it.

In the American League Conference Series, they lost the first three games to their arch-enemy Yankees. In the fourth game, they trailed in the ninth inning. Losing this game would mean a New York sweep as they would then advance to another World Series appearance.

However, there was no quit in this Boston team as they rallied in the ninth inning to win. They then proceeded to win the next three games to complete the greatest series comeback in baseball history. No team had ever been down 3-0 in a series and came back to win. The Red Sox would then complete the magical season by defeating the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series. How did they do this after 86 years? What was the secret? To listen to the players, it was all about chemistry and camaraderie.

In Joe McDonald's *ESPN.com* article celebrating the 2004 team, outfielder Kevin Millar provided a number of insights that gave a look into the mindset and mentality of a group of individuals that truly came together as a team,

"The group of guys, the family, it wasn't just a team. It was a unit that literally hung out together and ate together and liked each other. You can't buy that. You remember the tightness of that team. It wasn't the best players. We had a few superstars in Pedro and Manny, but we were the best unit if that makes sense.

You hear a lot, 'What's chemistry? If you don't have the players, you don't have chemistry.' Bull. You've got to pull for each other because you're not fooling us. You can't fool your teammates. If you feel that someone is pulling against Keith Foulke because he wants to be the closer and doesn't know his role, you feel that. If you're pulling against Pedro Martinez because he wants to be the guy, you feel that. We pulled for each other and that's what was cool."

In the same article, closer Keith Foulke talked about the responsibility that they had to one another,

"We were buddies and when Johnny [Damon] is out there

running into walls, that makes you want to work harder to make sure that effort doesn't go for naught. We're a family and you go to battle with your brothers."

Sure, they had some talented players but they only finished 3rd in the American League regular season that year. They were surely not as talented overall as the Yankees or probably even the Cardinals but they had the intangibles. As manager Terry Francona said,

"We have a lot of characters that have a lot of character."

Chemistry, camaraderie and high character players were the ingredients that allowed them to persevere and overcome all obstacles to win a World Championship. Those are ingredients that any team in any sport can have if they want them. They are also necessary if you are going to succeed in the face of adversity.

IT'S ONLY ONE POSSESSION

Every possession matters. Every minute matters. Every day matters. What we do in practice today will help or hurt us in our next game. Everything matters. In a close win or loss, most people remember the official's call or the key free throw toward the end of the game. Though not as memorable, are the turnover or shot with 2:00 to go in the 3rd quarter that counted just as much. Below is a basketball poem by basketball coach Jeff Smith that highlights this philosophy of making every moment matter...

It was only one possession,
Why must my coach scream?
My poor defense permitted the basket
But what can one hoop mean?

As the pass comes my direction,
And I fumble it into the stands,
The coach's' voice rings loud and clear,
"Catch with your eyes and hands!"

C'mon coach, it's a single possession,
Our team will be okay.
It's just the first two minutes,
My gosh, we've got all day.

At the ten-minute mark I remember,
That the center is strong and stout.
A putback for two, quite simply is due
To my failure to turn and block out.

But it was only one possession,
I didn't commit a crime,
My team is still ahead and I'm playing well,
And there's still plenty of time.

As the halftime buzzer is sounding,
And I watch the ball bank in,
I know I will hear from my loving coach
Of my questionable effort to defend.

But it was only one possession
Coach-don't have a heart attack!
We're down by one, but we're having fun,
I know we'll get the lead back!

The second half mirrors the first,
But it's early; it's not a big deal,
That's my failure to use a bounce fake,
Results in an unlikely steal.

But quickly I sink a jumper,
I'm greeted by high fives and slaps,
But the next possession I give up a lay-up
While suffering a metal lapse.

But it's only one possession,
C'mon Coach, "Chill Out."

It's crazy to see you disgusted
As you slap the assistant and shout.

“Victory favors the team making fewest mistakes.
Single possessions are the key.
So treat them like gold and do as your told,
And play with intensity.

I step on the line for one and one,
But I'm having a concentration lapse.
The ball soars through the air, Good Lord, it's a brick!
I'm afraid the support will collapse.

In post-game, I sit at my locker,
Pondering what more could I do.
I realize the value of each possession,
What a shame that we lost by two.

Most players can relate to this poem. In the course of a long game, it doesn't seem that one little play here or there matters. However, it matters a great deal to the player that ends up losing a game by one point. If you think small things don't matter, think of the last game you lost by one point. “Should of”, “could of”, “would of” are all tough phrases to swallow when you have lost a close game. But you can't just show up for a game and decide that you are going to do all of the little things right.

You do the little things right because you have developed the daily habits that lead you to be automatic. When you don't even have to think about boxing-out, diving for a loose ball or helping a teammate up off of the ground then you have developed positive habits. The ancient philosopher Aristotle said that we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit. Do you want to be excellent at your sport? Do you want to be respected and liked? Do you want to be a champion? You are what you repeatedly do. You are what your habits say you are.

WAYNE GRETZKY

Wayne Gretzky was the such a great hockey player that he earned the nickname “The Great One.” For further proof of his greatness, he is far

and away the NHL's all-time leading scorer. In fact, he accumulated more assists in his career than any other player has with assists and goals combined! Here is a story Stu Hackel wrote for *SI.com* where Gretzky talks about the 1982-1983 season when they lost to the New York Islanders in the Stanley Cup finals. This was the moment when he truly understood what it meant to win and not just be talented,

Wayne Gretzky learned about that price in 1983 when he and his young Oilers teammates lost in their first Cup final to the Islanders, who had won four straight championships. Walking by the Islanders' dressing room after the last game, Gretzky and teammate Kevin Lowe were surprised to see the Isles not whooping it up.

"Trottier was icing what looked like a painful knee," he wrote in his autobiography. "Potvin was getting stuff rubbed on his shoulder. Guys were limping around with black eyes and bloody mouths. It looked more like a morgue in there than a champion's locker room. And here we were perfectly fine and healthy.

"That's why they won and we lost. They took more punishment than we did. They dove into more boards, stuck their faces in front of more pucks, threw their bodies into more pileups. They sacrificed everything they had.

"And that's when Kevin said something I'll never forget. He said, 'That's how you win championships.'"

Gretzky and his Edmonton Oilers proceeded to win five of the next seven Stanley Cup Championships after this loss in 1982-1983. "The Great One" and his teammates learned how to outwork their talent. They found ways to be more than just a collection of talented individuals. Are you talented? What are you doing to outwork your talent and be more than the skills and abilities that you possess? Sometimes the intangibles are what separates champions from contenders.

PEYTON MANNING

Peyton Manning played the quarterback position as well as anyone in the history of the NFL for 18 years. He played 14 of those with the Indianapolis Colts and was the MVP of Super Bowl 41 in 2006. The Colts eventually released him after having neck surgery and missing the entire 2011 season. He then went on to play four seasons with the Denver Broncos. Manning would quarterback the team to the Super Bowl 50 championship in his final season.

He holds many NFL records including most touchdown passes and passing yards. His five league MVP's are the most in NFL history. He is also the only quarterback to ever start four Super Bowls with a different head coach each time. Manning is arguably the greatest passer in league history. Even though he was immensely talented, he developed the habit of outworking his talent. He didn't just rely on his physical skills. He understood that talent didn't equal good and that good was the enemy of great. He always kept working – not only on his physical skills but his mental skills as well.

Former UCLA All-American and NFL defensive back Rahim Moore once made a comment to Ben Hochman of the *Denver Post* regarding Manning's mentality and work ethic, which was followed up by a Manning rebuttal,

“We know when he gets on the field, he's going hard — like as if he never had a penny. That's how hard he works. You would think he never had done a commercial, none of that. He's training like he's a free agent.”

Let it sink in. What a quote, right? Peyton Manning, one of the best talents of his generation, attacks practice as if his career is on the line.

“I had a coach who taught me at an early age of treating practice like a game,” Manning said of David Cutcliffe, his beloved coach from his Tennessee days. “To me, this is where you become a better football team out here on the practice field. You don't just show up on a game and expect to be a good football team. I appreciate those words [from]

Rahim. I think somebody taught me to practice like that at a young age. That would be my advice to any young players. To me, this is where you become a better football team, out here on the practice field. You don't just show up on a game and expect to be a good football team.”

It is nearly impossible to find someone that says something negative about Peyton Manning. That is because he was so respected – not just because of his talent, but because of his character and leadership. He was so successful because he had a high-level mix of talent and intangibles. He was the most prepared player on the team. He was universally regarded as his team's hardest worker. When you are the team's star and provide the example for these intangibles, then it is going to be hard for teammates to be lazy.

It is not surprising that his teams appeared in four Super Bowls during his career and that he ended up winning nearly 69% of the games that he started. Only Tom Brady has won more games than Peyton Manning's 200 regular-season wins. Other talented quarterbacks have played in the NFL but Manning's work ethic and preparation have differentiated him from them. How about you? Are you outworking your talent or just relying on your talent? What are the extra things that you are doing to take you and your team to a higher level?

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE #1

In 1960 the Green Bay Packers were leading the Philadelphia Eagles 13-10 in the fourth quarter of the NFL Championship game. With about five minutes to go, the Eagles scored and hung on to win 17-13. The Packers and their legendary coach Vince Lombardi were devastated. When the summer came and the team met to go through training camp, Lombardi had a different approach to football. He was going to stress fundamentals more than ever. He was going to emphasize winning habits more than ever. David Maraniss told it this way in his book, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life Of Vince Lombardi*,

He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that the players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from the year

before... He began with the most elemental statement of all. "Gentlemen," he said, holding a pigskin in his right hand, "this is a football."

Lombardi became obsessed with teaching fundamentals and establishing positive daily habits in his players. He would constantly reinforce the proper ways to tackle and block. It was similar to when basketball coach John Wooden would teach his players the correct way to put on their socks and tie their shoes. Another Hall of Fame football coach Chuck Noll of the Pittsburgh Steelers used to say, "Champions are champions not because they do anything extraordinary, but because they do the ordinary things better than anyone else."

That loss in the 1960 game would end up being the only playoff loss that legendary football coach Vince Lombardi would suffer in his career. In fact, six months after the training camp that started the re-emphasis on fundamentals, the Packers won the NFL Championship 37-0 by defeating the New York Giants. The Super Bowl Championship trophy would eventually be named the Lombardi trophy.

Coach Lombardi was also famous for a quote about winning and habits that are worth repeating,

"Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing. You don't win once in a while; you don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing.

"There is no room for second place. There is only one place in my game, and that's first place. I have finished second twice in my time at Green Bay, and I don't ever want to finish second again. There is a second place bowl game, but it is a game for losers played by losers. It is and always has been an American zeal to be first in anything we do, and to win, and to win, and to win.

"Every time a football player goes to play his trade he's got to play from the ground up - from the soles of his feet right up to his head. Every inch of him has to play. Some guys

play with their heads. That's O.K. You've got to be smart to be number one in any business. But more importantly, you've got to play with your heart, with every fiber of your body. If you're lucky enough to find a guy with a lot of head and a lot of heart, he's never going to come off the field second.

"Running a football team is no different than running any other kind of organization - an army, a political party or a business. The principles are the same. The object is to win - to beat the other guy. Maybe that sounds hard or cruel. I don't think it is.

"It is a reality of life that men are competitive and the most competitive games draw the most competitive men. That's why they are there - to compete. To know the rules and objectives when they get in the game. The object is to win fairly, squarely, by the rules - but to win.

"And in truth, I've never known a man worth his salt who in the long run, deep down in his heart, didn't appreciate the grind, the discipline. There is something in good men that really yearns for discipline and the harsh reality of head to head combat.

"I don't say these things because I believe in the 'brute' nature of man or that men must be brutalized to be combative. I believe in God, and I believe in human decency. But I firmly believe that any man's finest hour - his greatest fulfillment to all he holds dear - is that moment when he has to work his heart out for a good cause and he's exhausted on the field of battle - victorious."

What kind of habits do you have? Do you have winning habits? The former University of Oregon and NFL head coach Chip Kelly had a motto that said, "Win the Day". Do you try to win every day?

Kelly would talk about doing the little things throughout each day that

leads to victory – victory for that day, which would lead to victory for the week, which would lead to victory for the month, and so on. Your next win began a long time ago with daily victories and habits being developed.

Every major victory has countless minor victories along the way that made it possible. Very few teams go undefeated. You can't expect to win every day but you can win today. Tackle your goals in small increments. Win the little battles and you'll eventually win the war. Win enough days and you'll eventually be a winner. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing.

UNLIKELY NBA CHAMPIONS

One of the greatest upsets in NBA playoff history was when the Dallas Mavericks defeated the Miami Heat to win the 2011 NBA Championship. Coming into that season, the Mavs had gotten bounced in the first round in three of the previous four seasons. After beating the Trailblazers in the first round of the 2010-11 playoffs, they were the underdogs to the Los Angeles Lakers who were going for a four-peat.

They caught fire and swept Kobe Bryant and the Lakers. They then bested the Russell Westbrook/Kevin Durant-led Oklahoma City Thunder. Even after pulling off two straight upsets in the Western Conference Playoffs, very few people gave them a chance as they went up against the Miami Heat super team that had been put together the previous summer with LeBron James, Chris Bosh, and Dwayne Wade. The Big Three, who had only lost three games in the entire playoffs up to the Finals, ended up succumbing to Dirk Nowitzki and the Mavs.

Nowitzki was the unquestioned star of the Mavericks but he was getting older. The core group of players that was his supporting cast was also aging veterans that had never won an NBA Championship, such as Jason Kidd, Shawn Marion, Jason Terry, and Tyson Chandler. According to Neil Paine of the website *FiveThirtyEight.com*, Dirk Nowitzki's supporting cast with the Mavs was the fifth-worst in NBA Finals history since 1985.

Do you want to know why a group of less-talented players beat the Big Three? One of the answers was revealed years later. At the end of the 2016-17 season, a vote was taken among NBA players. Dirk Nowitzki won the 2016-17 NBA Teammate of the Year award. However, what was just as revealing was that Tyson Chandler finished second and Jason Terry finished fourth in the player voting. Jason Kidd just finished up his third year

coaching the Milwaukee Bucks. Milwaukee had the 2016-17 Rookie of the Year in Malcolm Brogdon and the league's Most Improved Player in Giannis Antetokounmpo.

You want to know why an underdog team shocked the NBA, it was because they had a bunch of guys that were good teammates and had the proper focus. They were united by a common goal. Is your team just a collection of talented individuals? Are you being the best teammate that you can be? Are you influencing your teammates to stay focused and to be the best that they can be? If you want to maximize your team's potential then you need to increase the impact of each teammate. Want a better team? Have better teammates.

LARRY BIRD

Larry Bird is one of the greatest basketball players ever and was on the original Dream Team that dominated in the 1992 Olympics. The "Hick from French Lick" led little known Indiana State to the 1979 NCAA Championship Game while being named the Naismith College Player of the Year. He then went on to play his entire NBA career for the Boston Celtics, where he won three world championships. The 6'9" forward's career averages were 24.3 PPG, 10.0 RPG, and 6.3 APG. In 1998 he was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

He was considered one of the hardest workers and fiercest competitors. In Mark Shaw's book, *Larry Legend*, Bird's desire to outwork his talent was highlighted with this example, in which he was doing things that other players didn't do regularly,

"While most players waltzed into the locker room the required 90 minutes before game time, Bird has been on the floor by at least 6:00, more than two hours before tip-off. In the loneliness of Boston Garden, with only attendants and a few Celtics season ticket holders present, Bird shot more than 300 practice shots. He'd start with 6 to 10 free throws, move out on the court a bit, and then start firing away at a comfortable pace as comrade Joe Qatato hit him with perfect passes. Then the 'Parquet Picasso,' as he was dubbed, would speed up the routine and by the end of the workout throw up rapid-fire shots, many featuring the Bird

drop back a step maneuver that guaranteed him an opening from every angle.”

Even though Bird had a knack for scoring and was a prolific shooter, he was always trying to get better. In Bird’s autobiography, *Drive*, he said,

“As a kid, I always thought I was behind and I needed that extra hour to catch up. A coach once told me, “No matter how many shots you take, somewhere there’s a kid out there taking one more. If you dribble a million times a day, someone is dribbling a million and one.”

Whenever I’d get ready to call it a day, I’d think, “No. Somebody else is still practicing. Somebody-somewhere-is playing that extra ten or fifteen minutes and he’s going to beat me someday.”

I’d practice some more and then I’d think, “Maybe that guy is practicing his free throws now.” So I’d go to the line and practice my free throws and that would take another hour.

I don’t know if I practiced more than anybody, but I sure practiced enough. I still wonder if somebody-somewhere-was practicing more than me.”

Bird’s words sound strikingly similar to what LeBron James said about Kobe Bryant in a Mark Lamport-Stokes article for Reuters,

"I knew I had to be better because of Kobe Bryant. I knew he was in the gym and I knew he was working on his game. And I knew he was great. So every day that I didn't want to work out or every day I felt like I couldn't give more, I always thought of Kobe. Because I knew that he was getting better."

If you are bad, you can be average. If you are average, you can strive for good. Finally, if you are doing little things, leading yourself and outworking your talent, you can go from good-to-great.

STEPH CURRY

During Steph Curry's sophomore season in college, he averaged 25.9 PPG and led Davidson to the NCAA Tournament. During the tournament, they earned three straight upsets against Gonzaga, Georgetown, and Wisconsin. They would lose in the Elite Eight to the eventual champion Kansas Jayhawks by two. He was second-team All-American scoring guard and perhaps the best shooter in the nation but that wouldn't be enough for the next level.

Instead of leaving early he decided to come back to Davidson for one more year so that he could play point guard and maximize his potential in the NBA. During his junior year, he improved his assist total from 2.9 APG to 5.6 APG. That extra year proved valuable as it speeded up his transition to the NBA. He went on to become the NBA's first unanimous Most Valuable Player when he won the award in 2016 – as a point guard! He listened to key people and was coachable. This allowed him to reach his potential and help his team win the NBA Championship.

Talent is only a starting point. If you want to be truly great, then you must transcend your talent and learn how to do more. The best players are never satisfied. They have never arrived. Steph is a great example of someone that had talent that has squeezed everything he can out of it and more. He constantly wants to improve.