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The Power of Practice

By Carlos Arocha

“Bounce, bounce, nothing’s gonna keep me down!” — Jon Bon Jovi

Besides getting quality continuing education and having the chance to network with other members of the profession, one salient benefit of attending the Society of Actuaries (SOA) annual meeting that I particularly appreciate is the opportunity to listen to keynote speakers. Of particular interest at this year’s event in Washington, D.C. was Matthew Syed, a British journalist and broadcaster and former table-tennis international champion.

Syed spoke at length in a rather satirical style of his 2010 book: *Bounce—The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*.¹

Is it talent that makes Tiger Woods launch a 350-yard fade? Or what allows Roger Federer to caress a cross-court forehand winner? Or have they logged in thousands of hours in focused, high-quality coached training from quite an early age? Syed contends that it is indeed practice, not talent, that makes a great athlete. I already knew the old adage: “practice makes perfect,” but nonetheless I bought the book.

The answer to the above, proposed (among others) by Anders Ericsson, a psychologist at Florida State University, and explored meticulously by Syed, is this:

Differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long persistence of deliberate effort to improve performance.

The idea that natural talent determines success and failure is so powerful that today it is accepted without demur. But Syed’s autobiographical bias, the path to excellence in one of Britain’s big sports,² motivates him to conduct further research. Arguably top performers in any discipline have trained for at least 10,000 hours, or about 10 years if one practices some 20 hours a week. World-class tennis players, for example, have achieved this status well before turning 15. Novak Djokovic started playing at age 4; Rafael Nadal at 3.

While I was listening to Syed at the SOA annual meeting, I thought about the total amount of time that I had devoted in studying for SOA exams. A successful candidate, who follows the classical 100-hour rule of study time for each exam hour, may log some 3,000 hours, taking into consideration that ASA exams have an



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 26

aggregate duration of 15.5 hours and an FSA track about 12. Travel time toward fellowship is then increased by other educational requirements such as the FAP course or the FSA modules.

How close is an FSA to the 10,000-hour practice rule?

A candidate who failed all exams twice before passing them would have collected about 10,000 hours of experience, in a travel time of 10 years. This scenario is of course unrealistic: the sheer time above spent in preparing for the exams would guarantee, in many cases, passing in the first attempt. The candidate would also have to be a part-time student to achieve that. In addition, there is a natural problem to consider—a hurdle that I experienced myself—of whether the study time is actually top quality time. This consideration complicates the determination of hours of deliberate effort.

Notwithstanding, I argue that a hard-working candidate will have a relative good mastery of the actuarial curriculum.

What is the case for other analytically oriented credentials, such as CFA or FRM? Simply put, the amount of

exam hours is shorter than that required by any of the SOA qualifications, and therefore falls that much further from Syed's suggested hours. So at least one benefit of the FSA credentialing process is that it requires the hard work and dedication that can make actuaries into "expert performers."

The above line of thought may be aligned with Syed's tenet, brilliantly illustrated in his book. If you believe that hard work will achieve success, *Bounce*, crammed with fascinating stories and statistics, is a must-read. ●

END NOTES

- ¹ Syed, M., *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010.
- ² Syed was the United Kingdom's number-one table-tennis player at 24.