

## We need to talk about talent

The modern stress on hard work over natural ability misleads the young

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“Nobody will ever work as hard as I work,” Michael Jordan was quoted as claiming in *The Last Dance*. Netflix’s Chicago Bulls docu-series spoiled us in the spring with this and other Stakhanovite wisdom. “The pain. I want to feel that.” “Starts with hard work, ends with champagne.” “It” being effort, Jordan, we hear, “never freakin’ turned it off”.

A uniquely American sedulousness, I had assumed. And then I watched the Amazon Prime series on José Mourinho’s less-storied Tottenham Hotspur. Here is a game where the slack but skilful do not just get by but sometimes coin historic reputations. Talk panache to me, then, José, talk talent or at least tactics. But no. Most of his amazingly unenlightening speeches are variations on “try harder”.

Sport is more given than most fields to this worship of work. All athletes can name childhood friends, now lost to obscurity, who had twice the skill but no dedication. (The ones who toiled monstrously but just weren’t as good seem to slip their memories.)

If this blind spot for the obvious — for talent — were confined to sport, it would be harmless. But the “You get out what you put in” merchants are found in all walks. Some are advising your children to take “extreme ownership” in a YouTube motivational video right now. They mean well enough. If they went no further than broad encouragement to try one’s best in life, their counsel would be sound. What is more often intimated, though, is a near-linear relationship between effort and success. That is, hard work as a sufficient, not just a necessary, requirement. The notion is almost inspiring enough to excuse its delusional irresponsibility.

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Why do we find it so hard to talk about talent? To concede its vast role (whether lesser or greater than work’s) in deciding life outcomes? The cynic’s take is that a stress on work, for all its outward modesty, allows winners to put their success down to personal agency. At that point, progressive taxes, even a lack of deference to the successful, become harder to justify. They are no way to treat the deserving.

I just doubt that anything so egoist is at work. It is more that Enlightenment cultures, built on the idea of life as self-authored, cannot bring themselves to reckon with something as undemocratic as talent. Whether it is “innate” or acquired in youth, those who have it constitute a more or less imporous aristocracy. With few exceptions, third-tier athletes don’t sweat their way into the elite mid-career. In humdrum professions, an average employee can wring the most from their abilities without ever matching a coasting natural, or their own ambitions.

“Be talented”, I admit, is an inert kind of career advice. But it is crueler to tell the young that their rewards are sure to equal their efforts. As well as being mistaken, it is a formula for the most intense self-reproach if and when they fail. They are left with just their own indolence as the reason for the non-materialisation of their dreams.

As a man who often freakin’ turns it off, the valorisation of work should be shaming. But I have known too many counter-examples to take it seriously. I am far enough into professional life to have seen former peers and superiors stumble or just quietly fade. Not one can be accused of sloth. Nor can the people who raised me, who had superior work ethics and inferior lives. It is the young who are liable to fall for the trope of workrate-as-destiny.

There has never been a better or worse time to seek life advice. What used to be the discrete and risible field of “self-help” is now the ambient culture. For young men, especially, the supply of Jocko Willinks and Joe Rogans is both inexhaustible and free. Nothing of the kind was available when my generation was casting around for guidance.

But then, to see the content, the almost messianic faith in personal endeavour, perhaps we lucked out. There is more of survivorship bias than of truth in the insistence that work always pays. The beauty is that it encourages people to believe anything is possible. The cruelty is that it encourages people to believe anything is possible.

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