

Could the “Aggregation of Marginal Gains” Be the Difference Between Good and Great?

Description

Have you ever had one of those days where music just feels really difficult?

All those notes, compounded by having to worry about intonation, sound production, phrasing, dynamics, rhythm, pacing, and then having to put it all together under pressure?

Sheesh. It's a lot.

When faced with daunting challenges, whether it's winning a big audition/major competition, losing 50 lbs, or turning \$1000 into \$1,000,000, our tendency is to look for the home run. The one dramatic breakthrough or strategy that will pave the way to success.

I spent countless hours in school reading books and interviews, searching for the elusive key to unlocking my potential.

A different way of holding the bow to enhance my sound perhaps, an exercise or etude that would help me play perfectly in tune, the perfect practice routine, a mental strategy or mindset that would banish my nerves forever, the right strings to use, the best rosin, and so on. (I never did find that one transformative insight or epiphany, by the way.)

The trouble is, in searching for some big dramatic life-altering game-changer, we may fail to notice the real game-changer that's right in front of us.

The snowball effect

You know those days when things start off bad, and only get worse as the day goes on?

It starts with sleeping through our alarm. Then we rush through our shower, and cut ourselves shaving. Can't find matching socks. No time for breakfast. Sprint out of the house, get to the hall late, and discover we left our good bow at home on the piano.

Everything feels tight, and just a bit off. One thing leads to another, and pretty soon our mind is racing a million miles an hour, we can't focus, and are missing things left and right, certain that we are never going to be asked to play with this orchestra again.

Individually, none of these speed bumps are a big deal, but when you put them all together, it starts to feel pretty overwhelming. Like the universe is conspiring against us.

The good news, is that the same thing can work in reverse.

Team Sky

Team Sky is a professional cycling team based in Manchester, England, managed by a fellow named Dave Brailsford.

In 2010, they set upon the rather audacious goal of winning the Tour de France by 2015 – a pretty tall order since there had never been a British tour winner in the 97-year history of the event.

But a mere two years later, in 2012, British riders took first and second place (Bradley Wiggins and Chris Froome) in the Tour. Even more remarkably, Team Sky repeated in 2013, as Froome took home the yellow jersey.

What was their secret?

A principle they call the “aggregation of marginal gains.”

Tiny improvements, big wins

High-level musicians and athletes are terrific at paying attention to detail. But sometimes we can get tunnel vision and focus an inordinate amount of time and energy on too narrow an area. Focusing on trivial intonation issues at the expense of phrasing, for instance. Or focusing on nearly-imperceptible sound glitches at the expense of practicing run-throughs in simulated performance conditions. Or obsessing about tiny technical details, and neglecting to ensure the piece is memorized.

Team Sky looked at not just the *physical* training of their athletes, but *every area* that might contribute to overall performance. And rather than looking for radical breakthroughs, they focused instead on trying to improve every key area by *just 1%*. Their theory was that tiny gains, aggregated across many areas, would result in a meaningful advantage.

“The science is Team Sky’s famous philosophy of ‘marginal gains’: examine everything that might have an effect on the riders’ performance, and find a way to make it slightly better. By assembling a crack team of sports scientists whose expertise includes ergonomics, nutrition, physiology and psychology, Brailsford has turned Team Sky into a seemingly-unstoppable Tour de France juggernaut.

“People often associate marginal gains with pure technology, but it is far more than that,”

Brailsford said. “It is about nutrition, ergonomics, psychology. It is about making sure the riders get a good night’s sleep by transporting their own bed and pillow to each hotel. It is about using the most effective massage gel. Each improvement may seem trivial, but the cumulative effect can be huge.”

~[Dave Brailsford in road.cc](#)

Here are [more examples](#) from Team Sky’s website. And [video](#) of Dave Brailsford explaining the concept of marginal gains.

And a [great article](#) outlining what the US Olympic ski team is doing.

Take action

From the practice room to the stage, what are all the ingredients involved in a successful performance?

What could you do to improve each area by 1%?

What if you practiced performing non-judgmentally for 5 minutes every day? Practiced slooowly for 5 minutes? Spent 5 minutes playing your instrument just for fun? How might you reduce tension by 1%?

Or even in areas of your life off-stage, what could you do to enhance the experience of each day?

What might change if you wake up 5 minutes earlier and give yourself an extra few minutes to enjoy your tea? Or if you give a genuine compliment to someone, once a day? Smile at 1 person every day? Write down 5 things you’re grateful for, just once a week?

What one thing might you try this week?

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