



Extra Effort

It Takes Only a Fraction More

By Peter Vidmar

How often do you hear a parent, coach or teacher say, “You better study twice as hard if you want to be successful”? The sentiment makes sense, but the math doesn’t.

Most of the time, no matter how much we might want to, we *can’t* double a significant effort. In the case of a world-class athlete, it’s flat-out impossible.

In my sport, gymnastics, any competitor hoping to make the Olympics must work out at least five hours a day. If I want to double my training, I would have to train ten hours a day. That may be technically possible, but from a physical standpoint, it makes no sense. It would be exhausting to the point of being counterproductive.

Just a Fraction Longer

The key to improving isn’t to work twice as hard, it’s to work just a *fraction* harder—or smarter, or longer. In the end, it’s the fraction that matters. Increase the quality of your effort bit by bit. Being the best is never a matter of being twice as good as someone else. It’s usually measured by fractions.

In the Olympic arena, you will find many examples that prove this. Connie Carpenter-Phinney won the women’s road-racing gold medal in cycling in the 1984 Olympics after fifty miles of racing—by one inch. Gary Hall, Jr., won the fifty-meter freestyle at the 2004 Athens games by one one-hundredth of a second. In track and field, Justin Gatlin won the one-hundred meters in Athens to become the fastest man in the world—and the fourth-place finisher was just four one-hundredths of a second behind!

No one wins by running twice as fast or jumping twice as far. They win by fractions—by portions of seconds undetectable to the naked eye.

In *Sports Illustrated*, George Plimpton tells a story about a phenomenal new rookie pitcher for the New York Mets named Hayden “Sidd” Finch. Finch could throw a baseball 168 miles an hour—faster by one-third than anybody else in the major leagues. A third faster, in fact, than anyone had ever thrown a baseball.

Plimpton reported that Finch was proving to be unhittable in spring training. The Mets’ best hitters were going up to the plate and not swinging until the ball was already in the catcher’s mitt.

“It’s possible that an absolute superpitcher is coming into baseball,” Plimpton wrote. “This is so remarkable that the delicate balance between pitcher and hitter could be turned into disarray. He may well change the course of baseball history.”

Sidd Finch and his 168-mph fastball may indeed have changed the course of baseball history—except for one detail. *He did not exist*. Plimpton’s article appeared in the April 1 edition of *Sports Illustrated*. He made the whole thing up. It was all an elaborate April Fools’ joke, which the magazine revealed in its following issue. There was no mystic phenomenon named Sidd Finch. The Mets were not shoo-ins for the pennant and the World Series after all, and the joke was on the readers.

The possibility was intriguing, though. What if a person really could perform a third above the rest? What would be the impact? Such a performer really could change the course of a sport's history.

In the normal scheme of things, though, it just doesn't work that way. Not only can we not throw twice (or even a third) as fast as everyone else, or jump twice as high as others, but we can't work twice as hard, either.

But we can always work just a little bit harder or smarter.

Just Fifteen Minutes More

When I made the Olympic team along with Mitch Gaylord and Tim Daggett, I knew I couldn't outwork them by very much, if at all. We'd been teammates at UCLA for four years, and I knew how hard they trained.

In college I had a more modest goal: I'd be the last person out of the gym every day. This was hard to do when the rest of the team had the same goal. Workouts would get really long! But every once in a while, I accomplished my goal: at the end of the day, I'd find myself alone in an empty gym. I'd work another fifteen or twenty minutes more, and feel I was really gaining ground.

I once calculated just how much of a difference an extra fifteen minutes a day could make. If you did that every day for one year, it would add up to *ninety-one extra hours* of training. Think of the benefits you'd gain if you applied that kind of training to those skills that need a little extra attention. For an athlete training three hours a day, fifteen extra minutes a day over a year adds up to an extra month of training.

When measured over time, little extra efforts do make a big difference.

Where do you find the time to give that little extra effort, especially when your life is already so busy? Here's an exercise to get you started. Analyze one typical day by keeping a minute-by-minute log of your activities. List all of the little "time wasters" you do in each day, such as idle chatter, watching television, daydreaming, or Internet surfing. Calculate how much time you could gain by eliminating those obstacles to real effectiveness.

Commit yourself now to meaningful, lasting changes to these behaviors. Chances are, you will be amazed at the increase in your productivity and the time you have left over for the important stuff in life: the extra attention you give your client, the daily extra call you make to a customer, the hand-written thank-you note you send someone, the unscheduled moments you take to play with your son or daughter.

Little extra efforts do make a big difference and sometimes the small stuff really is the big stuff.

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