

Success

I'm sick to death of people saying we've made 11 albums that sound exactly the same; in fact, we've made 12 albums that sound exactly the same.

Angus Young—AC/DC Guitarist

Until I saw that quote about a year ago I never really noticed that band. And while I still don't listen to their records I remain utterly charmed by such a perfectly disarming response to criticism. However their albums may sound, they've sold over 150 million of them and can laugh as self-effacingly or loudly as they want all the way to the bank. And if they truly have germinated only one idea in 30 years it must be a damned fine one, deserving of some admiration. Now, I want everyone to keep that in mind as I set out for the third month in a row to milk the story from the August *Scientific American* that explores the expert mind. Anybody can find inspiration by looking everywhere for it and changing all the time, but it takes real nerve to settle on one idea. And if that approach is good enough for Giorgio Armani, it should be good enough for me.

In a brief departure from the story's main focus on chess masters, the author, Phillip Ross, turns his attention to another game to illustrate a point about training and its dominant role over talent among professional soccer players. In a 1999 study conducted in Japan, Germany, Brazil and Australia, it was found that the greatest numbers of professional soccer players in each of the four countries were born in the first quarter of the year after the cutoff date for youth soccer leagues in that country. The differences in distribution are quite dramatic in some places, rising to almost 40% of professional players in Japan born in the first quarter and then dipping to a little over 15% each for the third and fourth quarters. As one would expect, birth dates among the general population are distributed evenly across the calendar in all four countries. So the study's data suggest a strong correlation between success and improvement as Ross explains.

“Because these players were older than their teammates when they joined the leagues, they would have enjoyed advantages in size and strength, allowing them to handle the ball and score more often. Their success in early years would have motivated them to keep improving, thus explaining their disproportionate representation in the professional leagues.” So, while stories about youngsters who overcome disadvantage and work harder for improvement may inspire made-for-TV movies, it's the ease born from an initial advantage over other children that inspires more professional careers.

It all makes sense when we think about the basic fact that children want to play, not work. Naturally the ones who do better will want to play more while the ones who feel left behind are likely to tire of the discouragement and maybe seek new activities. Children focus on their strengths and never seem to tire of endless repetition when they like what they're doing. Somewhere in our development, that changes for a lot of us as we tend to do the opposite—look for something we can't do after getting the hang of a skill. When's the last time you shouted “WATCH THIS!” from a diving board before

doing your fiftieth cannonball of the day? Though I don't get the opportunity to work with many children, the ones I do encounter like to show off their talent on the table and will do so with an enviable lack of self consciousness. On the other hand, most of the grownups who call me for instruction will either tell me what they cannot do or ask me to tell them what they're doing wrong, a gloomy starting point in either case.

While we can't climb into a time machine with our pool cues to go back and do it again as kids, we can emulate kids and the way they use success to generate further success and improvement. The best place to start is with the draw shot, the number-one item on nearly every beginning and intermediate player's list of skills to improve. Problems arise with the draw shot when players get ahead of themselves and attempt to reproduce professional quality draw on difficult long shots. After every unsuccessful attempt, the person practicing invariably tries harder and hits each subsequent shot with a little more force. Along with the extra energy comes mounting tension. Pretty soon, after flogging the shot long enough and digging the hole deep enough, the frustrated player is ready to proclaim boldly, "I can't draw the cue ball."

Just about everybody who plays any pool at all can draw the cue ball. Because good draw results from a smooth, relaxed stroke, the place to begin working on improvement is the level at which we feel relaxed. And all pool players feel relaxed at the same level, whenever the shot is easy. So in order to develop a long, powerful, Mike-Massey-style draw stroke, we should begin with an easy shot, and build from there. Place an object ball about an inch from a long rail, one diamond away from a corner pocket with the cue ball one diamond segment behind the object ball. Remember, we're talking about an easy shot so be sure to set it up on the side of the table where you can reach it. Your goal at first is to draw the cue ball back to the side pocket, then later, when it looks easy, the length of the table. The shot should look easy and you must feel relaxed. After ten successful shots, move the cue ball back a half diamond for ten more easy draw shots. Eventually you will reach a distance where the shot does not look easy. That's the point where tension will begin to move into the shooting hand to stiffen it and kill the necessary acceleration for good draw. If you sense that tension, move the cue ball back up to its previous place to capture the relaxed feeling of an easy shot. Continue in this fashion, experiencing and building on repeated success until you find yourself drawing the cue ball back the length of the table on a table-length shot. It probably won't happen in one day but it will happen.

Somewhere in our development we cross a line where we leave behind the playful joy of childhood in favor of a "no pain, no gain" approach to learning as if torture were in some way ennobling. Yet, competitors who began as youngsters invariably hold an edge over those who started later in life, even in pool where mental prowess always trumps physical strength and careers span decades. It follows then that, if we probe the young mind we can uncover the principles of learning and improvement. Maybe some billiards experiments with children can help us distinguish the qualities that we've lost in order to enhance our improvement. Or maybe we should forget the mumbo jumbo, put on our play clothes and have some fun again.

