

What Makes Up An Elite Mentality

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From a population of approximately 1.1 million college athletes, roughly 853 become professional athletes every year, odds that are about the same as getting struck by lightning. What is it that separates this 0.0075% from the rest? Is it pure talent, something you are born with, is it abundant wealth and ultra-supportive parents that give you access to world-class coaching and facilities, or sheer luck, the roll of a million-sided dice? In an attempt to reveal some of the secrets of this supreme level of success, I will unpick the minds of three of the world's greatest sporting superstars: Kobe Bryant, Tom Brady, and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Kobe Bryant's alter ego, the Black Mamba, is generally brings to mind ruthlessness, the unwaning fire in him to win at all costs, and understandably so, as the mamba is described as a highly venomous snake. However, as said by the five-time NBA champion himself, the Mamba mentality simply means trying to be the best version of yourself. And how did Bryant do this? Not only did he work unnaturally hard, he implemented 'deliberate practice', a vital element to skill development and continual improvement.

In recent years, Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule, stating that 10,000 hours of practice in any field leads to expertise, has gained immense popularity, serving those with the belief that developing the skill of "showing up" is enough to achieve mastery. Unfortunately for this crowd, Bryant has proven that effort without intent is all but meaningless. A trainer for team USA named Robert described his first interaction with Bryant at a preparation camp in Las Vegas. At 4:15 am, Robert received a call from Bryant, who wanted help with some conditioning work. That day, as Robert later got to know, Bryant started his conditioning work around 4:30 am, continued to run and sprint until 6 am, lifted weights from 6 am to 7 am, and finally proceeded to make 800 jump shots between 7 am and 11 am. This was even before team USA had their practice. Clearly, Bryant was making huge headway on those 10,000 hours. But he was also spending every minute with purpose, honing select aspects of his game with method and clarity. Bryant's example may be the superlative, but it by all means justifies the power of deliberate practice combined with relentless dedication.

Now, an examination of Tom Brady's growth mindset, and how it led to his unbelievable transformation from underdog to NFL superstar. Brady was famously drafted in the sixth round of the NFL draft, with a report describing him accordingly: "poor build, skinny, lacks great physical stature and strength, lacks mobility and ability to avoid the rush, lacks a really strong arm, can't drive the ball down field, gets knocked down easily", and so on. In face of such raw, brutal honesty, many aspiring athletes would just throw in the towel, perhaps using the excuse that a career in sport is simply "not in the cards" for them. Brady, however, viewed this as an opportunity for growth. He said, "Every team in the NFL had multiple chances to draft me, and they didn't draft me until the sixth round. That's a choice that they made. And I don't think I'll ever get over that. I'll carry that chip on my shoulder for the rest of my life." Gallons of oil igniting his roaring internal flame, Brady used this insult as fuel, a determination to prove all the doubters wrong by improving exponentially.

And so he did, until the very end of his career. After 20 outrageously successful seasons with the New England Patriots, having won 6 Super Bowl championships, 9 AFC championships, 17 AFC East division titles and countless individual awards, he joined the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, whose head coach Bruce Arians remarked, "Tom's approach is infectious. He doesn't come in with a big ego or thinking he knows it all. He's willing to put in the work, learn new things, and adapt his game to fit our system. It's rare to see a player of his stature so hungry for growth." Brady's infinite quest for self-advancement wasn't just a means to success, it was deep-rooted within his belief-system, a principle he wouldn't let go despite having already achieved such a magnitude of greatness.

Another of Brady's tools that led to his excellence was his unshakeable sense of positivity. A stand-out example of this was the Super Bowl LI, when Brady's team, the Patriots, were trailing by 25 points to the Atlanta Falcons, a game in which the Patriots would eventually win by 6 points, marking the largest comeback in Super Bowl history. But this wasn't some God-sent miracle, it was yet another display of Brady's ability to see the light in the darkest of moments. His teammate, Julian Edelman, recounted Brady's words during that pivotal moment. Edelman stated, "He looked at us, dead in the eye, and said, 'We're still in it. Let's go. Keep fighting.'" Brady's undying sense of optimism, almost bordering on delusionality, is what brought the Patriots an epic victory, is what made him able to consistently achieve the impossible, and is what reinvented a skinny boy, lacking "great

physical stature and strength, the mobility and ability to avoid the rush, and a really strong arm”, to a legend who is widely considered the best NFL player in history.

Lastly, a man whose name is plastered onto the backs of thousands of fans across the world, Mr. Champions league, the footballing goal-machine: Cristiano Ronaldo. From humble beginnings sweeping the streets of the Portuguese island of Madeira to leading a lifestyle of unimaginable luxury and fame, Ronaldo’s story is no cake-walk. Rather, it is one riddled with adversity, poverty and self-sacrifice, that gradually paved the way for unparalleled self-discipline and dedication.

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