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The Nature and Nurture of Sports Performance, Blog 6

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THE NATURE AND NURTURE OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE (UNIV 291)

<https://rampages.us/naturenurture/author/taylorbwrap/>

Taylor Wray



Traveling To See the Worlds

by [Taylorbwrap](#) on September 25, 2015 in [Say Again?](#)

"I wouldn't call myself a runner.."

A friend of a friend is missing classes at Virginia Tech to see the remaining races of the UCI Worlds.



Courtesy of Google images

Needless to say, I decided to interview him because of his eagerness to see the world in action. A former track runner in high school, he claims running did not come naturally and the training wasn't very enjoyable. In contrast, the superhuman [Tarahumara](#) runners were in a sense, "born to run".

In terms of nature vs. nurture, my interviewee believes athletes are raised and built; however, some are born with natural abilities. He believes sports in general, are largely mental and do require a certain toughness.

"You have to have that drive and motivation and [determination](#)..."

That drive and determination is exactly what swimmer, Diana Nyad, possessed during [her swim from Cuba to Florida](#). Nyad also had support and backing from her team, which my interviewee related to the

UCI Team Time Trials. He believes each individual on the team pushes themselves harder because of the team itself.



Courtesy of Interviewee

When asked whether he would want to be genetically tested to see if he possessed the “sports genes”, he quickly said “no”. He explained that he would be “depressed” to learn that he lacked the genes to excel in

climbing, considering his major love for the sport. He would want to continue pushing himself to be better despite what genetics say.

“these athletes are no joke”

by [Taylorbwray](#) on September 22, 2015 in [Word on the Street](#)

“Some [people] are just lucky and are natural born athletes and others just have to work for it...”



courtesy of Facebook

I chose to interview my close friend, who is a talented soccer player, climber, and amateur cyclist. I believe it takes a natural born athlete to equally excel in each of those sports; however, he believes it's a mix of luck (mostly genes) and dedication.

Soccer, climbing, and cycling each require a degree of mental toughness and "grit". Similar to Diana Nyad's TED Talk, he explained how mental toughness allows athletes to push themselves when their bodies may fail.

"During the last 10 minutes of a 90 minute soccer game, my mind is telling my body to stay alert and send more oxygen to my legs".

As an amateur cyclist, he hopes to complete a ride from Richmond to Williamsburg in less than 10 hours. He is fairly new to cycling, just like 18-year-old, Chloe Dygert. After rehabbing a torn anterior crucial ligament, Dygert exploded onto the cycling scene, winning just two national titles and turning pro. Monday, she won the junior gold medal at the UCI Worlds. Upon hearing [Dygert's story](#),



courtesy of Google images

I asked my friend if he believed he could be out there racing. His answer was ultimately no; however, he believes if given the right tools (i.e. coaching, sponsorships, time) that he actually could. "I don't think I could win though, these people are athletes and that's something that shouldn't be understated".

Mental Grit and "Sports" Genes?

by [Taylorbwray](#) on September 21, 2015 in [Another Look](#)

I truly believe that "mental grit" is 90% responsible for the success of athletes. You have to have the mindset of a champion to be a champion. You have to want it and when it comes down to the last sprint, the last stroke, the last tumbling pass, you have to be able to dig deep. Mental toughness plays a major role in all sports, especially when it comes to training. All athletes must have the mental capability to push themselves past their limits.



courtesy of Google images

Diana Nyad truly embodies mental toughness. It takes “mental grit” to even pursue such journey and commit to the training required. In her TED Talk, “Never Give Up”, she spoke of vomiting, hypothermia, lack of calories, and deadly predators—all of which could have easily ended her journey. Yet, she powered through it because of her immense mental “grit”. I was able to really connect to Nyad’s TED Talk, because as an athlete myself, I know what it’s like to dig deep. I know what it’s like to push myself beyond my limits and even further than imagined. She was truly willing to die for her goal, which normal people would simple call “crazy”.

However, one could argue the importance of “sports” genes over mental toughness. The Human Genome Project (HGP) is a great example how hard scientists have worked to understand genes. Since it’s start, HGP has found approximately 20,500 human genes and has given the world a map of the human genome. With 20,500 human genes, the task of identifying “sports” genes is a difficult one. I believe genetic testing for “sport” genes could be interesting, but would it really change the mindset of a couch potato? I believe couch potatoes are usually set in their ways and believe that sports are too difficult to attempt. But who knows, maybe genetic testing for these “sports” genes could lead to a healthier nation!



courtesy of Google images

Learn more about the Human Genome Project here: <http://www.genome.gov/12011238>

Learn more about Diana Nyad's swim from Cuba to Florida here: <https://youtu.be/un127NxC4j4>

Memoirs of a Gymnast: “Nature vs. Nurture”

by [Taylorbwray](#) on September 14, 2015 in [Initial Impressions](#)

Coming into this course, I was very skeptical about the “nature versus nurture” concept. As I mentioned in my introduction, I’ve been a competitive gymnast for 14 years, starting at the young age of 6. My entire life has revolved around gymnastics and I have actually trained over 10,000 hours. I have won numerous state and regional titles and have been lucky enough to compete internationally. With that being said, I have often been told by my coaches that I have raw, natural talent/ability.



As a product of genetic-plus-environmental parents, I have often wondered if heredity and nurture are responsible for my gymnastics success. I’d like to say that my family fostered a love of competition in me at a very young age. I feel that as a child, I was always surrounded by sports. My parents played co-ed softball together and to this day my dad still plays competitive softball. Through watching my dad play, I quickly learned the emotions associated with winning, such as excitement and happiness. And I learned even quicker, the emotions that were associated with losing, such as anger. I took these emotions I learned with me throughout my gymnastics career. Anytime I didn’t place first, I had my “McKayla Maroney face” on. However, the feeling of defeat and the anger associated fueled my training and strive for perfection.



McKayla Maroney, not impressed face (GIF courtesy of Google.com)

I feel like I should also mention that my parents never forced me into any sport. I chose gymnastics, mainly because my older sister did it, but I chose it without the influence of my parents. There is no history of gymnastics before my sister, and my parents had no clue about gymnastics. My parents have also never been like the ones mentioned in the NPR segment, “How Likely is it, really, that your athletic kid will turn pro?” My parents are beyond supportive of me, but they never pushed the sport on me. Gymnastics is very different than other sports, and it is very difficult to become elite (gymnastics term for pro). Elite gymnasts often forego public school and are homeschooled by their coaches. My parents made sure that school came first, then gymnastics. In high school, I made the decision to pursue collegiate gymnastics and my parents back me 100%. They took me to tour universities and sent me to college gymnastics camps. However, it is very hard to get scouted in the gymnastics world. Often times gymnasts “walk-on” to the team if they do not receive a scholarship. Although I did get accepted to one of the big name schools in college gymnastics, I chose to stay here in Richmond. My parents were never part of the “26%” that hope their child turns pro.

Going back to the nature side of the debate, I found the video panel, “Birth to Stardom: Developing the Modern Athlete in 10,000 Hours?” very thought provoking. I was able to answer the questions and ideas posed by Gladwell in my own way, and related them to my experiences in gymnastics. Going back to the idea of natural talent/ability, the panel shared their thoughts on natural ability hindering athletes. The panel agreed that often times, “natural athletes” become bored with the sport and training fast. Once they realized their natural ability, these athletes felt as if they didn’t need to train hard, which ultimately led to their demise. In terms of my experience and often being referred to as a “natural”, I have never been bored. However, gymnastics is a totally different sport than football, soccer, or basketball. Gymnastics is more of an individual sport, and the possibilities of new skills to learn are truly endless. Whenever one skill is mastered, there is another one waiting that is 10 times harder. Gymnasts are always evolving along with the sport in general. There are always new rules and regulations to make gymnastics more challenging, not to mention to various levels involved. Sports like football, soccer, and basketball, (which the panel revolved around) are team sports and require perfection in one area. The same drills are run over and over, and the rules never change. I can see how athletes get bored and how easily they can lose a hard-working mindset.



Shawn Johnson, Olympic Gold Medalist (image courtesy of Google.com)

Overall, the readings and media shed new light on the “nature versus nurture” debate. I am truly fascinated by the entire idea and I am glad that I am able to relate many of aspects to myself. However, I have realized that I will always tend to relate most of this course to my experience with gymnastics!

Taylor Wray

by [Taylorbwrap](#) on September 1, 2015 in [What brought you here?](#)

Hi Everyone!

My name is Taylor Wray and I’m an Exercise Science/Health Science major. I’m super excited VCU students have the opportunity to get more involved with the bike race by taking these courses! I’m taking this course because I’ve always been interested in the nature of athletes. Are athletes born or raised? As a competitive gymnast of 14 years, I’ve won numerous state and regional titles. It makes me wonder whether gymnastics is just in my DNA, or was I raised to be a champion? I’m excited to find out the answer to this question and learn much more about the nature of athletes!

Follow me on Twitter: @wraytb