



## In Search of Perfection – The never ending journey

2008: Journalist Malcolm Gladwell released the best-selling book “Outliers – The Story of Success”

Amongst the various case studies analyzed by Gladwell; the one which was on the tip of everyone's tongue was his analysis of Anders Ericsson's study, which suggested that for an individual to become an expert, he must devote 10,000 hours of practice to his craft.

An interesting point to note here is that we often misinterpret expertise for perfection and vice-versa. Hence, to measure perfection, one must answer the more philosophical question “What is Perfection?” The closest we came to its illustration was in Montreal in 1976 during the Summer Olympics when Nadia Comăneci landed a perfect 10, the first gymnast ever do so. Considered an unattainable feat, conquered by a 14-year-old.

Perfection may be the ultimate goal (or rather the unachievable goal), but what must be highlighted is the journey embarked to reach this paradoxical status. It is the desire to be perfect that cements greatness rather than the actual attainment of the feat. This sets one apart from their peers. Sportsmen who etched their names in the stone slabs of legends did two things – they fed their strengths and starved their weaknesses. To understand this phenomenon better, let's take three extraordinary sportsmen who have mastered their art by either eliminating their weaknesses or enhancing their strengths.

Quite possibly the greatest Test match in the history of cricket (well at least for Indian Fans) took place between the 11th and 15th of March, 2001. Rahul Dravid and VVS Laxman managed to drag the team out of a certain and humiliating defeat to victory. Mid-way through Day 3, India were all-out trailing by 274 runs and logically, Australia demanded a follow on. VVS continued his good form from the first innings, when Dravid went out to join him with the scoreboard reading 232/4. What followed was a master-class of cricket with both batsmen playing the entire 4th day (VVS made 281 and Dravid made 180), taking India to a massive 657. With 384 runs to make in 75 overs (Day 5), the Australian team was subjected to clinical bowling by Harbhajan who took five wickets. The match ended with Australia being bowled out for 212 – 173 runs short of the win; and the rest, as they say, is history.



Navjot Sindhu once famously commented that Dravid “would walk on broken glass if his team asked him to”. His peers run out of superlatives when describing his genius; he has rightfully earned his spot amongst the greatest to ever hold a bat. However, not many know the sheer dedication to his craft that made him such a complete batsman. If perfection is the objective, then Dravid always strived for it; and he did so by eliminating faults he saw in himself. There is one story where Dravid realized that he used to get out on deceptively mediocre balls, deliveries that in hindsight should have been left. So in order for him to leave these balls, he would have to rewrite his second nature - he once stood in the nets for 3 hours practicing only how and when to leave a ball. However, the rewiring of the brain was not enough. He needed to ensure that his shots were perfect. So, Dravid, in the most Dravid way, again adapted. This time, in the locker rooms, surrounded by mirrors, bat in his hand, and sessions of shadow practice.

This level of introspection does not come naturally. It's a conscious decision made by a person when the only thing that matters is getting better.

David Beckham is quite possibly the most recognizable man in football thanks to his trademark free kicks. The flight of those free kicks was so acclaimed that Hollywood decided to name a movie after them (Bend it like Beckham). But that perfect curve Beckham used to add on to his strike was not a fluke, it came from years of continuous improvement. 'I must have taken tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands [of free kicks]. I would go to the local park, place the ball on the ground and aim at the wire meshing over the window of a small community hut.' After this ritual in the park, he would go home and kick balls at his sister's stuffed teddy bears. This obsessive regime ensured that he could guide the ball anywhere he pleased when he graced the field of professional football.



Closer to home and our third sportsperson today, is probably the only Indian who is a 15 time World Champion in a sport - Pankaj Advani. When he was 9 years old, he was too young to enter Pool Halls, hence his substitute was a carrom board and marbles. Once he was old enough, he hit the felt. With cue sports, the proper equipment is required to train. However, in Pankaj's case, he was always focused on improving his game regardless of whether or not the equipment was available. When there would be no Snooker table around, he would find a flat surface with similar dimensions on which he practiced his stance and balance. He often visualized shots that he might have to play and arched his body accordingly. On flights he would use his tray table to practice his bridge (hand formation made to support the shaft of the cue). When not surrounded by flat surfaces, Pankaj continuously and constantly visualized shots. He trained his mind to understand situations through imaginary simulations, so that in a competitive situation, his mind would be ready. It's his remarkable obsession of ensuring that his game is a hundred percent that has cemented his place as one of the greatest sportsmen to come out of India.

Rahul Dravid is not the perfect batsmen. He has been dismissed countless times. David Beckham has missed many free kicks and penalties. And Pankaj has lost frames. They are not perfect. But they need not be. They accomplished greatness, not because they were perfect, but because they strived for it. Their obsession with perfection was so overwhelming that it elevated their skills beyond those of their peers. They are not perfect, but they give us brief glimpses into perfection.

Sport, in my opinion, can teach us a lot about life. Its purity and simplicity is easy to translate into our “everyday lives”. In each of the examples, one trait is common, and that is the desire to improve. What was the benchmark for these greats was not how good their opponents were but how they could become better than they were yesterday. There is a Japanese philosophy known as “kaizen” which means continuous improvement and this is what we all should strive for – to ensure that every day, we are slightly better than what we were yesterday. After all Hemingway said, “There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility lies in being superior to your former self.”