

Practice Does Not Make Perfect

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Slate:

A decade ago, Magnus Carlsen, who at the time was only 13 years old, created a sensation in the chess world when he defeated former world champion Anatoly Karpov at a chess tournament in Reykjavik, Iceland, and the next day played then-top-rated Garry Kasparov—who is widely regarded as the best chess player of all time—to a draw. Carlsen’s subsequent rise to chess stardom was meteoric: grandmaster status later in 2004; a share of first place in the Norwegian Chess Championship in 2006; youngest player ever to reach World No. 1 in 2010; and highest-rated player in history in 2012.

What explains this sort of spectacular success? What makes someone rise to the top in music, games, sports, business, or science? This question is the subject of one of psychology’s oldest debates. In the late 1800’s, Francis Galton—founder of the scientific study of intelligence and a cousin of Charles Darwin—analyzed the genealogical records of hundreds of scholars, artists, musicians, and other professionals and found that greatness tends to run in families. For example, he counted more than 20 eminent musicians in the Bach family. (Johann Sebastian was just the most famous.) Galton concluded that experts are “born.” Nearly half a century later, the behaviorist John Watson countered that experts are “made” when he famously guaranteed that he could take any infant at random and “train him to become any type of specialist [he] might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents.”

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