THE MUNDANITY OF EXCELLENCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT ON STRATIFICATION AND OLYMPIC SWIMMERS

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Olympic sports,and competitive swimming in particular, provide an unusually clear opportunity for studying the nature of excellence. In other fields, it may be less clear who are the outstanding performers: the best painter or pianist, the best business-person, the finest waitress or the best father. But in sport (and this is one of its attractions) success is defined more exactly, by success in competition. There are medals and ribbons and plaques for first place, second, and third; competitions are arranged for the head-to-head meeting of the best competitors in the world; in swimming and track, times are electronically recorded to the hundredth of a second; there are statistics published and rankings announced, every month or every week. By the end of the Olympic Games every four years, it is completely clear who won and who lost, who made the finals, who participated in the Games, and who never participated in the sport at all.

Within competitive swimming in particular, clear stratification exists not only between individuals but also between defined levels of the sport as well. At the lowest level, we see the country club teams, operating in the summer-time as a loosely-run, mildly competitive league, with volunteer part-time coaches. Above that there are teams which represent entire cities and compete with other teams from other cities around the state or region; then a "Junior Nationals" level of competition, featuring the best younger (under 18 years old) athletes; then the Senior Nationals level (any age, the best in the nation); and finally, we could speak of world or Olympic class competitors. At each such level, we find, predictably, certain people competing: one athlete swims in a summer league, never seeing swimmers from another town; one swimmer may consistently qualify for the Junior Nationals, but not for Seniors; a third may swim at the Olympics, and never return to Junior Nationals. The levels of the sport are remarkably distinct from one another.

This is convenient for the student of stratification. Because success in swimming is so definable, and the stratification system so (relatively) unambiguous (so that the athlete's progress can be easily charted), we can clearly see, by comparing levels and studying individuals as they move between and within levels, what exactly produces excellence. In addition, careers in swimming are relatively short; one can achieve tremendous success in a brief period of time. Rowdy Gaines, beginning in the sport when 17 years old, jumped from a country club league to a world record in the 100 meter freestyle event in only three years. This allows the researcher to conduct true longitudinal research in a few short years.

In short, in competitive swimming one can rather quickly learn something about stratification; here is a prime location for studying the nature of excellence.[1]

I. THE RESEARCH

From January 1983 through August 1984 I attended a series of national and international-class swimming meets conducted

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[1] The general approach taken here derives from symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, as practiced by Berger and Luckmann (1966), Blumer (1986), Schutz (1971), and Schutz and Luckmann (1973).

The sociology of sport literature is thin on swimming; however, the following are either classics or recent work which was helpful: Elias and Dunning (1986), Fine (1979, 1987), Goffman (1961), Guttmann (1978), Lever (1983), and Rigauer (1981). Perhaps one of the finest pieces of social critique of sport appears woven throughout David Halberstam's *The Breaks of the Game* (1981).

by United States Swimming, Inc., the national governing body for the sport. United States Swimming sanctions the selection process for American teams for international events (the Olympic Games, for example), and charters several thousand amateur swimming clubs around the country with membership of several hundred thousand athletes, by far the majority of whom are children and teenagers. These clubs provide the organizational base for amateur swimming in America. The meets attended included both the Indoor (March) and the Outdoor (August) National Championships, the USS International Meet, the Seventeen Magazine Meet of Champions, the Speedo/Dupont Meet of Champions, the 1984 Olympic Trials, and the 1984 Summer Olympic Games. I carried standard press credentials, and was free to go anywhere and talk to anyone. At most meets I traveled with the Mission Viejo (CA) Nadadores, National Team Champions at the time, sharing plane flights, hotel accommodations, meals, and in-town transportation with them. I lived with the coaches and athletes of this team in a traditional participant observer role. It was clear to all involved that I was there as a researcher; no deception was involved at any stage of the research. During this period and several occasions since, I interviewed a total of some 120 national and world-class swimmers and coaches.[2]

Over these years I frequently spent from 3 days to a month and a half in Mission Viejo (about an hour's drive south of Los Angeles) living with coaches, visiting practices, and interviewing swimmers, coaches and officials. The Nadadores gave me complete access to their practices, weight lifting sessions, team meetings, parties, and other events. In addition, I was present in Mission Viejo during the U.S. Olympic Team Training Camp, which was held there in July of 1984, and was the only non-staff member on the pool deck during the (closed) afternoon practices of the Olympic Team. In addition, I have recently completed five years of coaching a regional-level age group swimming team (children 7–16 years old) in New York State. In that capacity I traveled to many meets, from the smallest "country club" events to the Eastern Zone Championships, as well as other large meets east of the Mississippi River. I have also coached in the southern U.S. and worked with beginners as well as National Age Group record holders.

In short, this report draws on extended experience with swimmers at every level of ability, over some half a dozen years. Observation has covered the span of careers, and I have had the chance to compare not just athletes within a certain level (the view that most coaches have), but between the most discrepant levels as well. Thus these findings avoid the usual "sociology of knowledge" problem of an observer's being familiar mainly with athletes at one level. When top-rank coaches, for instance, talk of what makes success, they are often thinking of the differences between athletes whom they see within the top level of the sport. Their ignorance of the day-to-day realities of lower levels (learn-to-swim programs, country club teams) prevents them from having a truly comparative view. Or when sports journalists write about Olympic athletes, they typically begin the research *after* the great deed is done, and so lack a legitimate longitudinal view; the athlete's memory of his or her own distant history will be distorted.

This study of Olympic swimmers, by contrast, (1) looks at different levels of the sport, and (2) was begun well in advance of the Games, when no one (obviously) knew who would win and who not; it was designed with the explicit idea of seeing how the plant grew before the flower bloomed. The research was both cross-sectional (looking at all levels of the sport) and longitudinal (over the span of careers).

[2] Interviews were either recorded on tape (in the early stages of the research) or in written notes. Tape recording had a somewhat inhibiting effect on when and where interviews could be conducted, and so was abandoned. Interviews proceeded from a base of a few standard questions—e.g. "How did you begin in swimming?" "When did you first achieve national standing?" to a more open-ended conversation around issues of becoming a champion, finding the right coach, etc. For further details, see "Sources and Acknowledgements" in Chambliss, 1988.

THE NATURE OF EXCELLENCE

By "excellence" I mean "consistent superiority of performance." The excellent athlete regularly, even routinely, performs better than his or her competitors. Consistency of superior performances tells us that one athlete is indeed better than another, and that the difference between them is not merely the product of chance. This definition can apply at any level of the sport, differentiating athletes. The superiority discussed here may be that of one swimmer over another, or of all athletes at one level (say, the Olympic class) over another. By this definition, we need not judge performance against an absolute criterion, but only against other performances. There are acknowledged leaders on every team, as well as teams widely recognized as dominant.

To introduce what are sources of excellence for Olympic athletes, I should first suggest—saving the demonstration for later—what does *not* produce excellence.

(1) Excellence is not, I find, the product of socially deviant personalities. These swimmers don't appear to be "oddballs," nor are they loners ("kids who have given up the normal teenage life.")[3] If their achievements result from a personality characteristic, that characteristic is not obvious. Perhaps it is true, as the mythology of sports has it, that the best athletes are more self-confident (although that is debatable); but such confidence could be an effect of achievement, not the cause of it.[4]

(2) Excellence does *not* result from quantitative changes in behavior. Increased training time, *per se*, does not make one swim fast; nor does increased "psyching up", nor does moving the arms faster. Simply doing more of the same will not lead to moving up a level in the sport.

(3) Excellence does *not* result from some special inner quality of the athlete. "Talent" is one common name for this quality; sometimes we talk of a "gift," or of "natural ability." These terms are generally used to mystify the essentially mundane processes of achievement in sports, keeping us away from a realistic analysis of the actual factors creating superlative performances, and protecting us from a sense of responsibility for our own outcomes.

So where does excellence—consistent superiority of performance—come from?

I. *Excellence Requires Qualitative Differentiation*

Excellence in competitive swimming is achieved through qualitative differentiation from other swimmers, not through quantitative increases in activity. This means, in brief, that levels of the sport are qualitatively distinct; that stratification is discrete, not continuous; and that because of these factors, the swimming world is best conceived of not as a single entity but as multiple worlds, each with its own patterns of conduct.

Before elaborating on these points, I should clarify what is meant here by "quantitative" and "qualitative." By quantity, we mean the number or amount of something. Quantitative improvement entails an increase in the number of some one thing one does. An athlete who practices 2 hours a day and increases that activity to 4 hours a day has made a quantitative change in behavior. Or, one who swims 5 miles and changes to 7 miles has made a quantitative change. She does more of the same thing; there is an increase in quantity. Or again, a freestyle swimmer who, while maintaining the same stroke technique, moves his arms at an increased number of strokes per minute has made a quantitative change in behavior. Quantitative improvements, then, involve doing *more of the same thing*.

By quality, though, we mean the character or nature of the thing itself. A qualitative change involves modifying what is actually being done, not simply doing more of it. For a swimmer doing the breaststroke, a qualitative change might be a change from pulling straight back with the arms to sculling them outwards, to the

[3] In fact, if anything they are more socially bonded and adept than their peers.The process by which this happens fits well with Durkheim's (1965) description of the sources of social cohesion.

[4] These issues are addressed at length in "The Social World of Olympic Swimmers," Daniel F. Chambliss, in preparation.

sides; or from lifting oneself up out of the water at the turn to staying low near the water. Other qualitative changes might include competing in a regional meet, instead of local meets; eating vegetables and complex carbohydrates rather than fats and sugars; entering one's weaker events instead of only one's stronger events; learning to do a flip turn with freestyle, instead of merely turning around and pushing off; or training at near-competition levels of intensity, rather than casually. Each of these involves doing things differently than before, not necessarily doing more. Qualitative improvements involve doing *different kinds of things*.

Now we can consider how qualitative differentiation is manifested:

**Different levels of the sport are qualitatively distinct*. Olympic champions don't just do much more of the same things that summer-league country-club swimmers do. They don't just swim more hours, or move their arms faster, or attend more workouts. What makes them faster cannot be quantitatively compared with lower level swimmers, because while there may be quantitative differences—and certainly there are, for instance in the number of hours spent in workouts—these are not, I think, the decisive factors at all.[5]

Instead, they do things differently. Their strokes are different, their attitudes are different, their group of friends are different; their parents treat the sport differently, the swimmers prepare differently for their races, and they enter different kinds of meets and events. There are numerous discontinuities of this sort between, say, the swimmer who competes in a local City League meet and one who enters the Olympic Trials. Consider three dimensions of difference:

(1) Technique: The styles of strokes, dives and turns are dramatically different at different levels. A "C" (the lowest rank in United States Swimming's ranking system) breaststroke swimmer tends to pull her arms far back beneath her, kick the legs out very wide without bringing them together at the finish, lift herself high out of the water on the turn, fail to take a long pull underwater after the turn, and touch at the finish with one hand, on her side. By comparison, a "AAAA" (the highest rank) swimmer, sculls the arms out to the side and sweeps back in (never actually pulling backwards), kicks narrowly with the feet finishing together, stays low on the turns, takes a long underwater pull after the turn, and touches at the finish with both hands. Not only are the strokes different, they are so different that the "C" swimmer may be amazed to see how the "AAAA" swimmer looks when swimming. The appearance alone is dramatically different, as is the speed with which they swim.

The same is true for all the other strokes (to a greater or lesser degree), and certainly for starts (dives) and turns. Olympic-class swimmers, to make one other observation, are surprisingly quiet when they dive into the water—there is little splash. Needless to say, this is not true for a novice 10-year old.

(2) Discipline: The best swimmers are more likely to be strict with their training, coming to workouts on time, carefully doing the competitive strokes legally (i.e., without violating the technical rules of the sport)[6], watch what they eat, sleep regular hours, do proper warmups before a meet, and the like. Their energy is carefully

[5] True, the top teams work long hours, and swim very long distances, but (1) such workouts often begin after a swimmer achieves national status, not before, and (2) the positive impact of increased yardage seems to come with huge increases, e.g. the doubling of workout distances—in which case one could argue that a *qualitative* jump has been made. The whole question of "how much yardage to swim" is widely discussed within the sport itself.

Compare the (specious, I think) notion that a longer school day/term/year will produce educational improvements.

[6] One day at Mission Viejo, with some sixty swimmers going back and forth the length of a 50-meter pool, coach Mark Schubert took one boy out of the water and had him do twenty pushups before continuing the workout. The boy had touched the wall with one hand at the end of a breast stroke swim. The rules require a two-handed touch.

One hundred and twenty hands *should have* touched, one hundred and nineteen *did* touch, and this made Schubert angry. He pays attention to details.

channeled. Diver Greg Louganis, who won two Olympic gold medals in 1984, practices only three hours each day—not a long time—divided up into two or three sessions. But during each session, he tries to do every dive perfectly. Louganis is never sloppy in practice, and so is never sloppy in meets.[7]

(3) Attitude: At the higher levels of competitive swimming, something like an inversion of attitude takes place. The very features of the sport which the "C" swimmer finds unpleasant, the top-level swimmer enjoys. What others see as boring—swimming back and forth over a black line for two hours, say—they find peaceful, even meditative[8], often challenging, or therapeutic. They enjoy hard practices, look forward to difficult competitions, try to set difficult goals. Coming into the 5.30 AM practices at Mission Viejo, many of the swimmers were lively, laughing, talking, enjoying themselves, perhaps appreciating the fact that most people would positively hate doing it. It is incorrect to believe that top athletes suffer great sacrifices to achieve their goals. Often, they don't see what they do as sacrificial at all. They like it. (See also, Hemery 1986).

These qualitative differences are what distinguish levels of the sport. They are very noticeable, while the quantitative differences between levels, both in training and in competition, may be surprisingly small indeed. David Hemery, who won a Gold Medal in the 400-meter intermediate hurdles at the 1968 Olympics, reports the results of interviewing world-class athletes in 22 different sports. "In many cases, the time spent training [a quantitative factor, in our terms] did not alter significantly from the start of specialization right up to the top level." Yet very small quantitative differences in performance may be coupled with huge qualitative differences: In the finals of the men's 100-meter freestyle swimming event at the 1984 Olympics, Rowdy Gaines, the gold medalist, finished ahead of second-place Mark Stockwell by .44 seconds, a gap of only 8/10 of 1%. Between Gaines and the 8th place finisher (a virtual unknown named Dirk Korthals, from West Germany), there was only a 2.2% difference in time. Indeed, between Rowdy Gaines, the fastest swimmer in the world that year, and a respectable 10-year old, the quantitative difference in speed would only be about 30%.

Yet here, as in many cases, a rather small *quantitative* difference produces an enormous *qualitative* difference: Gaines was consistently a winner in major international meets, holder of the world record, and the Olympic Gold Medalist in three events.

**Stratification in the sport is discrete, not continuous.* There are significant, qualitative breaks—discontinuities—between levels of the sport. These include differences in attitude, discipline, and technique which in turn lead to small but consistent quantitative differences in speed. Entire teams show such differences in attitude, discipline, and technique, and consequently certain teams are easily seen to be "stuck" at certain levels.[9] Some teams always do well at the National Championships, others do well at the Regionals, others at the County Meet. And certainly swimmers typically remain within a certain level for most of their careers, maintaining throughout their careers the habits with which they began. Within levels, competitive improvements for such swimmers are typically marginal, reflecting only differential growth rates (early onset of puberty, for instance) or the jockeying for position within the relatively limited sphere of their own level.

I am suggesting here that athletes do not reach the top level by a simple process of

[7] From an interview with his coach, Ron O'Brien.

[8] Distance swimmers frequently compare swimming to meditation.

[9] For example: several well-known teams consistently do well at the National Junior Olympics ("Junior Nationals," as it is called informally), and yet never place high in the team standings at the National Championships ("Senior Nationals"), the next higher meet.

These teams actually prevent their swimmers from going to the better meet, holding them in store for the easier meet so that the team will do better at that lesser event. In this way, and in many others, teams choose their own level of success.

"working their way up," by accumulating sheer time in the sport; improvements across levels of the sport are not generated through quantitative changes. No amount of extra work *per se* will transform a "C" swimmer into a "AAAA" swimmer without a concurrent qualitative change in how that work is done. It is not by doing increasing amounts of work that one becomes excellent, but rather by changing the kinds of work. Beyond an initial improvement of strength, flexibility and feel, there is little increasing accumulation of speed through sheer volume of swimming. Instead, athletes move up to the top ranks through *qualitative jumps*: noticeable changes in their techniques, discipline, and attitude, accomplished usually through a change in settings, e.g. joining a new team with a new coach, new friends, etc, who work at a higher level. Without such qualitative jumps, no major improvements (movements through levels) will take place.

We find the same phenomenon in other areas of endeavor. Carl von Clausewitz, writer of the classic 19th century text on military strategy *On War*, noted that great generals (and he could have added, great swimmers and coaches)[10] rise quickly. Especially in wartime, when battlefield performance is the vital need, there is no long period of apprenticeship before one achieves the highest ranks, no tedious "accumulation" of knowledge or skills:

> . . .The most distinguished generals have never risen from the very learned or really erudite class of officers, but have been mostly men who, from the circumstances of their position, could not have attained to any great *amount* of knowledge. (p. 196). . .the only question therefore is, of what *kind* should these ideas be. . .(Clausewitz, etc, p. 197) (emphasis added)

The same pattern holds true in academic life. The leading figures of a discipline are not those whose quantity of production is so high—although that may give an added advantage to those who are widely read—but rather those who write the quality, or kind, of articles and books that are widely read and talked about. No sheer number of papers given at local conferences or published in minor journals "add up to" a single Sorokin-award winning book (in sociology), or an article in *Daedalus*.[11] At the micro-level, simply increasing the number of hours one works each day will not produce a major change in status if the kind of work done remains the same.

It may be hard to believe this completely. It seems to contradict our "common sense," what we know from daily experience. The fact is, when people around us do more, they do tend to do better. When we play in a weekend softball game, sheer increased effort (at running the bases, say) brings increased success ("Would a bunch of guys really go at it this hard just for a beer?"). Children in Little League are told—and their coaches believe—that hard work is the major cause of success (Fine 1987), and swimming coaches widely believe that those who stay in the sport the longest and swim year-round will be more successful. The top swimming coaches in America fall into the same prejudice, attributing success often to "hard work" or "talent." Since they habitually, unreflectively, live at the top level (having spent almost their entire coaching career there), they never see what creates the differences between levels. The fact is, quantitative changes do bring success—but only *within* levels of the sport.[12] Doing more of the same pays off, but only in very limited, locally visible ways. One can achieve a slight advantage over peers by doing more without changing the quality of what is done.

Having seen that "more is better" within local situations, we tend to extrapolate:[13] If I work this hard to get to my level, how hard must Olympic swimmers work? If I

[10] Chambliss, 1988, Chapter 1.

[11] One realizes this in reading job candidates' vitae: far better to see one page that lists a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Book Award than fifteen pages of book reviews in the regional association's journal.

[12] Increased effort, for instance, does bring increased success. But at the higher levels of the sport, virtually everyone works hard, and effort *per se* is not the determining factor that it is among lower level athletes, many of whom do not try very hard.

[13] For a different explanation of the tendency to reduce qualitative factors to quantitative, see Lukacs, 1976.

sacrifice this much to qualify for the State Championships, how much must they sacrifice? We believe, extrapolating from what we learn about success at our own level, that they must work unbelievably hard, must feel incredible pressure, must sacrifice more and more to become successful. Assuming implicitly that stratification in sports is continuous rather than discrete (that the differences are quantitative) we believe that top athletes do unbelievable things. In short, we believe that they must be superhuman.

**This is really several worlds, each with its own patterns of conduct.* The analysis pursued above can be taken one step further. If, as I have suggested, there really are *qualitative* breaks between levels of the sport, and if people really don't "work their way up" in any simple additive sense, perhaps our very conception of a single swimming world is inaccurate. I have spoken of the "top" of the sport, and of "levels" within the sport. But these words suggest that all swimmers are, so to speak, climbing a single ladder, aiming towards the same goals, sharing the same values, swimming the same strokes, all looking upwards towards an Olympic gold medal. But they aren't.[14] Some want gold medals, some want to make the Team, some want to exercise, or have fun with friends, or be out in the sunshine and water. Some are trying to escape their parents. The images of the "top" and the "levels" of swimming which I have used until now may simply reflect the dominance of a certain faction of swimmers and coaches in the sport: top is what *they* regard as the top, and their definitions of success have the broadest political currency in United States Swimming. Fast swimmers take as given that faster is better—instead of, say, that more beautiful is better; or that parental involvement is better; or that "well-rounded" children (whatever that may mean) are better. The very terminology of "top" and "level" then, reifies the current ranking system.

Such reification is not only analytically suspect, it is also empirically incorrect. Most swimmers don't want to win an Olympic gold medal. Some may have, at most, a vague, un-acted upon desire to go someday to the National Championships. Of course, if an adult asks what a child wants to accomplish in swimming, the child may say "I want to win the Olympics," but this is more to impress or please the adults than really to announce the child's own intentions. When younger athletes talk about such goals, they are sharing fantasies, not announcing plans; and fantasies are more often enjoyed in their unreality than in their fulfillment.

So we should envision not a swimming world, but multiple worlds[15] (and changing worlds is a major step toward excellence), a horizontal rather than vertical differentiation of the sport. What I have called "levels" are better described as "worlds" or "spheres." In one such world, parents are loosely in charge, coaches are teenagers employed as life guards, practices are held a few times a week, competitions are scheduled perhaps a week in advance, the season lasts for a few weeks in the summertime, and athletes who are much faster than the others may be discouraged by social pressure even from competing, for they take the fun out of it.[16] The big event of the season is the City Championship, when children from the metropolitan area will spend two days racing each other in many events, and the rest of the time sitting under huge tents playing cards, reading, listening to music, and gossiping. In another world, coaches are very powerful, parents seen only occasionally (and never on the pool deck), swimmers travel thousands of miles to attend meets, they swim 6 days a week for years at a time, and the fastest among them are objects of

[14] March and Olsen make a similar point with regard to educational institutions and organizations in general: organizations include a variety of constituents with differing goals, plans, motivations, and values. Unity of purpose, even with organizations, cannot simply be assumed. Coherence, not diversity, is what needs explaining. March and Olsen, 1976.

[15] See Shibutani in Rose, 1962, on "social worlds"; Blumer, 1969.

[16] These fast swimmers who come to slow meets are called hot dogs, showoffs, or even jerks. (Personal observations.)

respect and praise. The big event of the season may be the National Championships, where the athletes may spend much time—sitting under huge tents, playing cards, reading, listening to music and gossiping.[17]

Each such world has its own distinctive types of powerful people and dominant athletes, and being prominent in one world is no guarantee of being prominent in another.[18] At lower levels, the parents of swimmers are in charge; at the higher levels, the coaches; perhaps in the Masters teams which are made up only of swimmers over 25 years old, the swimmers themselves. Each world, too, has its distinctive goals: going to the Olympics, doing well at the National Junior Olympics, winning the City Meet, having a good time for a few weeks. In each world the techniques are at least somewhat distinct (as with the breaststroke, discussed above) and certain demands are made on family and friends. In all of these ways, and many more, each so-called "level" of competitive swimming is qualitatively different than others. The differences are not simply quantifiable steps along a one-dimensional path leading to the Olympic Games. Goals are varied, participants have competing commitments, and techniques are jumbled (again, see March and Olsen, 1976).

This notion of the horizontal differentiation of the sport—of separate worlds within competitive swimming, rather than a hierarchy—may appear to be refuted by the obvious fact that moving "up" to the Olympic level is very difficult, while moving "down" is apparently easy, as if a sort of gravity obtained. We all know that people don't become Olympic champions in a day. It takes time to learn all those skills, pick up the techniques, develop the stamina, change the attitudes, practice the discipline. The physical work as well as the social and psychological readjustments are significant. This difficulty seems to suggest an asymmetry to these worlds.

Less obvious, though, is that "sliding back down" is empirically difficult indeed. For one thing, techniques once learned and habitualized don't deteriorate overnight. Quite a few swimmers, years past retirement from the sport, can come out and with a few months' practice do quite well. In 1972 a 16-year old named Sandra Nielson won three gold medals in the Munich Olympics in swimming. In 1984, just after turning 29, she entered the National Long Course Championships, placed in the finals, and swam faster than she had 12 years earlier—and with far less training.[19] At that point she had been away from competition for 10 years, returning only months before the Nationals. Nielson had lost very little of her ability.

Then too, there seem to be permanent or at least persistent effects of hard training; attitudes of competitiveness and strategies for racing once learned are rarely forgotten.[20] And finally—perhaps as significantly—the social pressures are strongly against "going back" to a lower level of competition. Hotshots simply are not welcome in the country club leagues while they are hotshots, and if their skills do begin to deteriorate, embarrassment will more likely lead one simply to quit the sport rather than continue. This may be roughly akin to the older professor who, rather than attempt to compete with

[17] Again, personal observations from a large number of cases. While there are significant differences between swimmers of the Olympic class and a country club league, the basic sociability of their worlds is not one of them.

[18] "Indeed, prestige ladders in the various worlds are so different that a man who reaches the pinnacle of success in one may be completely unknown elsewhere." Shibutani in Rose, 1962.

Similarly in academia: one may be a successful professor at the national level and yet find it difficult to gain employment at a minor regional university. Professors at the regional school may suspect his/her motives, be jealous, feel that he/she "wouldn't fit in," "won't stay anyway," etc. Many top-school graduate students discover upon entering the markets that no-name colleges have no interest in them; indeed, by attending a Chicago or Harvard Ph.D. program one may limit oneself to the top ranks of employment opportunities.

[19] The training information comes from her coach and, later, husband, Dr. Keith Bell.

[20] Some anecdotal evidence from swimmers (e.g. Steve Lundquist) and coaches (e.g. Terry Stoddard) suggests that the physical effects of hard training can last for years, so that a swimmer in effect "rachets up" to higher levels with better training, and will not slow down appreciably once the training load is reduced.

younger colleagues in a fast-moving field, begins to fill his or her time with more committee duties and foundation consultantships. Graceful senior retirement is preferable to humiliating decline.

All of this (admittedly provocative) argument is to suggest that the swimming world is really several different worlds, and the "top" performers are better seen as different than as better. Even that formulation suggests that at one point the excellent performer could have been dominant at a lesser level in that other world. But as Clausewitz pointed out, in comparing the highest commanders in Napoleon's army with a colonel,

> There are Field Marshals who would not have shone at the head of a cavalry regiment, and vice versa. (Clausewitz 1984, p.198).

Some people don't even begin to shine, that is, until they reach the higher levels. For our purposes here, Clausewitz's "vice versa" in the quotation above reminds us of the separation of subworlds, and of the major points made: "levels" of swimming are qualitatively distinct; stratification in the sport is discrete, not continuous; and the sport is most accurately seen as a collection of (relatively) independent worlds.

II. *Why "Talent" does not lead to Excellence*

Up to now, I have suggested that there are discrete social worlds of competitive swimming, and that an athlete joins those different worlds by adopting the behavior patterns of members. This argument implies, first, that most people actually don't want to belong to the highest rank, and second, that the role of effort is exaggerated. I am suggesting that athletic excellence is widely attainable, if usually unsought. Many people—let us say, hundreds of thousands in this country—have the physical wherewithal to belong to the Olympic class. While there may be an "entry level" of physical characteristics necessary for Olympic performances, that level may be quite low, and in any case is not measurable.

At this point most readers will ask, *But what about talent?*. "Talent" is perhaps the most pervasive lay explanation we have for athletic success. Great athletes, we seem to believe, are born with a special gift, almost a "thing" inside of them, denied to the rest of us—perhaps physical, genetic, psychological, or physiological. Some have "it," and some don't. Some are "natural athletes," and some aren't. While an athlete, we acknowledge, may require many years of training and dedication to develop and use that talent, it is always "in there," only waiting for an opportunity to come out. When children perform well, they are said to "have" talent; if performance declines, they may be said to have "wasted their talent". We believe it is that talent, conceived as a substance behind the surface reality of performance, which finally distinguishes the best among our athletes.

But talent fails as an explanation for athletic success, on conceptual grounds. It mystifies excellence, subsuming a complex set of discrete actions behind a single undifferentiated concept. To understand these actions and the excellence which they constitute, then, we should first debunk this concept of talent, and see where it fails. On at least three points, I believe, "talent" is inadequate:

**Factors other than talent explain athletic success more precisely.* We can, with a little effort, see what these factors are in swimming: geographical location, particularly living in southern California where the sun shines year round and everybody swims; fairly high family income, which allows for the travel to meets and payments of the fees entailed in the sport, not to mention sheer access to swimming pools when one is young; one's height, weight, and proportions; the luck or choice of having a good coach, who can teach the skills required; inherited muscle structure —it certainly helps to be both strong and flexible; parents who are interested in sports. Some swimmers, too, enjoy more the physical pleasures of swimming; some have better coordination; some even have a higher percentage of fast-twitch muscle fiber. Such factors are clearly definable, and their effects can be clearly demonstrated. To subsume all of them, willy-

nilly, under the rubric of "talent" obscures rather than illuminates the sources of athletic excellence.

It's easy to do this, especially if one's only exposure to top athletes comes once every four years while watching the Olympics on television, or if one only sees them in performances rather than in day-to-day training. Say, for instance, that one day I turn on the television set and there witness a magnificent figure skating performance by Scott Hamilton. What I see is grace and power and skill all flowing together, seemingly without effort: a single moving picture, rapid and sure, far beyond what I could myself do. In phenomenological terms, I see Hamilton's performance "monothetically," at a single glance, all-at-once. (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 75) "His skating," I may say, referring to his actions as a single thing, "is spectacular." With that quick shorthand, I have captured (I believe) at a stroke the wealth of tiny details that Hamilton, over years and years, has fitted together into a performance so smoothly that they become invisible to the untrained eye.[21] Perhaps, with concentration, Hamilton himself can feel the details in his movements; certainly a great coach can see them, and pick out the single fault or mistake in an otherwise flawless routine. But to me, the performance is a thing entire.

Afterwards, my friends and I sit and talk about Hamilton's life as a "career of excellence," or as showing "incredible dedication," "tremendous motivation"—again, as if his excellence, his dedication, his motivation somehow exist all-at-once. His excellence becomes a thing inside of him which he periodically reveals to us, which comes out now and then; his life and habits become reified. "Talent" is merely the word we use to label this reification.

But that is no explantion of success.

**Talent is indistinguishable from its effects.* One cannot see that talent exists until after its effects become obvious. Kalinowski's research on Olympic swimmers demonstrates this clearly:

> One of the more startling discoveries of our study has been that it takes a while to recognize swimming talent. Indeed, it usually takes being successful at a regional level, and more often, at a national level (in AAU swimming) before the child is identified as talented. (p. 173)
>
> "They didn't say I had talent until I started to get really good [and made Senior Nationals at sixteen]; then they started to say I had talent. . ." (p. 174)
>
> . . .despite the physical capabilities he was born with, it took Peter several years (six by our estimate) to appear gifted. This is the predominant, though not exclusive, pattern found in our data on swimmers. Most of them are said to be "natural" or "gifted" after they had already devoted a great deal of time and hard work to the field. (p. 194)
>
> . . .whatever superior qualities were attributed to him as he grew older and more successful, they were not apparent then [before he was thirteen]. (p. 200)

The above quotations suggest that talent is *discovered* later in one's career, the implication being that while the athlete's ability *existed* all along, we were unaware of it until late. Kalinowski, like many of us, holds to the belief that there must be this thing inside the athlete which precedes and determines success, only later to be discovered. But the recurring evidence he finds suggests a different interpretation: perhaps there is no such thing as "talent," there is only the outstanding performance itself. He sees success and immediately infers behind it a cause, a cause *for which he has no evidence other than the success itself.* Here, as elsewhere, talent (our name for this cause) cannot be measured, or seen, or felt, in any form other than the success to which it supposedly gives rise.

In Kalinowski's analysis, then—and the lay view is much the same as his—there lies an analytic error of the first degree: the independent and the dependent variables cannot be measured separately.[22]

[21] "Now, no one can see in an artist's work how it evolved: that is its advantage, for wherever we can see the evolution, we grow somewhat cooler. The complete art of representation wards off all thought of its solution; it tyrannizes as present perfection." (Nietzsche 1984, p. 111)

[22] I am *not* saying "natural ability doesn't matter." I am saying that to use "talent" as a way of

**The "amount" of talent needed for athletic success seems to be strikingly low.* It seems initially plausible that one must have a certain level of natural ability in order to succeed in sports (or music, or academics). But upon empirical examination, it becomes very difficult to say exactly what that physical minimum is. Indeed, much of the mythology of sport is built around people who lack natural ability who went on to succeed fabulously. An entire genre of inspirational literature is built on the theme of the person whose even normal natural abilities have been destroyed: Wilma Rudolph had polio as a child, then came back to win the Olympic 100 Meter Dash. Glenn Cunningham had his legs badly burned in a fire, then broke the world record in the mile. Such stories are grist for the sportwriter's mill.

More than merely common, these stories are almost routine. Most Olympic champions, when their history is studied, seem to have overcome sharp adversity in their pursuit of success. Automobile accidents, shin splints, twisted ankles, shoulder surgery are common in such tales. In fact, they are common in life generally. While some necessary minimum of physical strength, heart/lung capacity, or nerve density may well be required for athletic achievement (again, I am *not* denying differential advantages), that minimum seems both difficult to define and markedly low, at least in many cases. Perhaps the crucial factor is not natural ability at all, but the willingness to overcome natural or unnatural disabilities of the sort that most of us face, ranging from minor inconveniences in getting up and going to work, to accidents and injuries, to gross physical impairments.

And if the basic level of talent needed, then, seems so low as to be nearly universally available, perhaps the very concept of talent itself—no longer differentiating among performers—is better discarded altogether. It simply doesn't explain the differences in outcomes. Rather than talk about talent and ability, we do better to look at what people actually do that creates outstanding performance.

The concept of talent hinders a clear understanding of excellence. By providing a quick yet spurious "explanation" of athletic success, it satisfies our casual curiosity while requiring neither an empirical analysis nor a critical questioning of our tacit assumptions about top athletes. At best, it is an easy way of admitting that we don't know the answer, a kind of layman's slang for "unexplained variance." But the attempt at explanation fails. What we call talent is no more than a projected reification of particular things done: hands placed correctly in the water, turns crisply executed, a head held high rather than low in the water. Through the notion of talent, we transform particular actions that a human being does into an object possessed, held in trust for the day when it will be revealed for all to see.

This line of thought leads to one more step. Since talent can be viewed only indirectly in the effects that it supposedly produces, its very existence is a matter of faith. The basic dogma of "talent" says that what people do in this world has a cause lying behind them, that there is a kind of backstage reality where the real things happen, and what we, you and I, see here in our lives (say, the winning of a gold medal) is really a reflection of that true reality back there. Those of us who are not admitted to the company of the elect—the talented—can never see what that other world of fabulous success is really like, and can never share those experiences. And accepting this faith in talent, I suggest, we relinquish our chance of accurately understanding excellence.

Still, we want to believe in talent. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it, "What people would like is that a coward or a hero be born that way."[23], knowing that it protects us by degrading the very achievements that it pretends to elevate (Staples 1987); magically separating us from those people who are great athletes, ensuring that we are incomparable to them; and relieving those of us who are not excellent of

explaining performance is to resort to tautology. The action of performing is reified—turned into a thing—and we call it "talent."

[23] Sartre 1957, p. 34.

responsibility for our own condition. "To call someone 'divine'," Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, "means 'Here we do not have to compete.'" (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 111) In the mystified notion of talent, the unanalyzed pseudo-explanation of outstanding performance, we codify our own deep psychological resistance to the simple reality of the world, to the overwhelming mundanity of excellence.[24]

III. *The Mundanity of Excellence*

"People don't know how ordinary success is," said Mary T. Meagher, winner of 3 gold medals in the Los Angeles Olympics, when asked what the public least understands about her sport. She then spoke of starting her career in a summer league country club team, of working her way to AAU meets, to faster and faster competitions; of learning new techniques, practicing new habits, meeting new challenges.[25] What Meagher said—that success is ordinary, in some sense—applies, I believe, to other fields of endeavor as well: to business, to politics, to professions of all kinds, including academics. In what follows I will try to elaborate on this point, drawing some examples from the swimming research, and some from other fields, to indicate the scope of this conception.

**Excellence is mundane.* Superlative performance is really a confluence of dozens of small skills or activities, each one learned or stumbled upon, which have been carefully drilled into habit and then are fitted together in a synthesized whole. There is nothing extraordinary or superhuman in any one of those actions; only the fact that they are done consistently and correctly, and all together, produce excellence. When a swimmer learns a proper flip turn in the freestyle races, she will swim the race a bit faster; then a streamlined push off from the wall, with the arms squeezed together over the head, and a little faster; then how to place the hands in the water so no air is cupped in them; then how to lift them over the water; then how to lift weights to properly build strength, and how to eat the right foods, and to wear the best suits for racing, and on and on.[26] Each of those tasks seems small in itself, but each allows the athlete to swim a bit faster. And having learned and consistently practiced all of them together, and many more besides, the swimmer may compete in the Olympic Games. The winning of a gold medal is nothing more than the synthesis of a countless number of such little things—even if some of them are done unwittingly or by others, and thus called "luck."

So the "little things" really do count. We have already seen how a very small (in quantitative terms) difference can produce a noticeable success. Even apparent flukes can lead to gold medal performances:

> In the 100 Meter Freestyle event in Los Angeles, Rowdy Gaines, knowing that the starter for the race tended to fire the gun fast, anticipated the start; while not actually jumping the gun, it seems from video replays of the race that Gaines knew exactly when to go, and others were left on the blocks as he took off. But the starter turned his back, and the protests filed afterwards by competitors were ignored. Gaines had spent years watching starters, and had talked with his coach (Richard Quick) before the race about this starter in particular. (Field notes; see Chambliss, 1988 for full description)

Gaines was not noticeably faster than several of the other swimmers in the race, but with this one extra tactic, he gained enough of an advantage to win the race. And he seemed in almost all of his races to find such an advantage: hence the gold medal. Looking at such subtleties, we can say that not only are the little things important; in some ways, the little things are the only things.

Peter Drucker, the dean of American management consultants, suggests a similar idea when he writes of business "practices,"

[24] To coin an ungainly but accurate phrase. I borrow the term "mundanity" from phenomenological philosopher Maurice Natanson, in *The Journeying Self.*

[25] Meagher's entire career is described in detail in Chambliss, 1988.

[26] Such techniques are thoroughly explained in Maglischo (1982) and Troup and Reese (1983).

the little things which taken together produce excellence. In his widely-read books, especially *The Effective Executive* (1985), Drucker emphasizes that it is not magic, but rather the faithful execution of particular practices that leads to success in business:

> . . .to be effective also does not require special gifts, special aptitude, or special training. Effectiveness as an executive demands doing certain—and fairly simple—things. It consists of a small number of practices. . . (Drucker 1985, p. vii)

In swimming, or elsewhere, these practices might at first glance seem very minimal indeed:

> When Mary T. Meagher was 13 years old and had qualified for the National Championships, she decided to try to break the world record in the 200 Meter Butterfly race. She made two immediate qualitative changes in her routine: first, she began coming on time to all practices. She recalls now, years later, being picked up at school by her mother and driving (rather quickly) through the streets of Louisville, Kentucky trying desperately to make it to the pool on time. That habit, that discipline, she now says, gave her the sense that every minute of practice time counted. And second, she began doing all of her turns, during those practices, correctly, in strict accordance with the competitive rules. Most swimmers don't do this; they turn rather casually, and tend to touch with one hand instead of two (in the butterfly, Meagher's stroke). This, she says, accustomed her to doing things one step better than those around her—always. Those are the two major changes she made in her training, as she remembers it.[27]

Meagher made two quite mundane changes in her habits, either one of which anyone could do, if he or she wanted. Within a year Meagher had broken the world record in the butterfly.

Here, then, is an area ripe for research in organizational studies: to what extent do mundane considerations lead to the success or failure of organizations, let alone individuals? A willingness to spend ten minutes a year writing a Christmas card can maintain an old friendship for decades; a faulty telephone system, which cuts off one-quarter (or even one-tenth) of all incoming calls can ruin a travel agency or mail-order house; a president who simply walks around the plant once in a while, talking with the workers, can dramatically improve an organization's morale —and its product (Peters and Waterman, 1982); a secretary, that archetypal manager of mundane work, can make or destroy an executive, or even an entire division. At the lowest levels of competitive swimming, simply showing up for regular practices produces the greatest single speed improvement the athlete will ever experience[28]; and at the lower levels of academia, the sheer willingness to put arguments down on paper and send it away to a journal distinguishes one from the mass of one's colleagues in the discipline.[29] Again, the conclusion: the simple doing of certain small tasks can generate huge results. Excellence is mundane.

**Motivation is mundane, too.* Swimmers go to practice to see their friends, to exercise, to feel strong afterwards, to impress the coach, to work towards bettering a time they swam in the last meet. Sometimes, the older ones, with a longer view of the future, will aim towards a meet that is still several months away. But even given the longer-term goals, the daily satisfactions need to be there. The mundane social rewards really are crucial (see Chambliss, 1988, Chapter 6). By comparison, the big, dramatic motivations—winning an Olympic gold medal, setting a world record—seem to be ineffective unless translated into shorter-term tasks. Viewing "Rocky" or

[27] Interview notes.

[28] In teaching swim lessons, I have seen children make improvements of 20 and more seconds for a 50-yard swim (which takes about a minute) during the course of a single lesson. At the top level, swimmers spend years to improve one second in the same event.

[29] The fact that the reader might not believe this reveals more about the reader's own social world—namely of professionally active scholars—than the realities of life for the bulk of college professors. For many, simply participating in scholarship is a huge step.

"Chariots of Fire" may inspire one for several days, but the excitement stirred by a film wears off rather quickly when confronted with the day-to-day reality of climbing out of bed to go and jump in cold water. If, on the other hand, that day-to-day reality is itself fun, rewarding, challenging, if the water is nice and friends are supportive, the longer-term goals may well be achieved almost in spite of themselves. Again, Mary T. Meagher:

> I never looked beyond the next year, and I never looked beyond the next level. I never thought about the Olympics when I was ten; at that time I was thinking about the State Championships. When I made cuts for Regionals [the next higher level of competition], I started thinking about Regionals; when I made cuts for National Junior Olympics, I started thinking about National Junior Olympics. . .I can't even think about the [1988] Olympics right now. . .Things can overwhelm you if you think too far ahead. (Interview notes)

This statement was echoed by many of the swimmers I interviewed. While many of them were working towards the Olympic Games, they divided the work along the way into achievable steps, no one of which was too big. They found their challenges in small things: working on a better start this week, polishing up their backstroke technique next week, focusing on better sleep habits, planning how to pace their swim. They concentate on what Karl Weick has called "small wins:" the very definable, minor achievements which can be rather easily done but which produce significant effects[30], not the least of which is the confidence to attempt another such "small win." Weick's article on the subject is, typically, insightful and suggestive. He says:

> A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals. Small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results. (Weick 1984, p. 43).

For instance, many top swimmers are accustomed to winning races in practice, day after day. Steve Lundquist, who won two gold medals in Los Angeles, sees his success as resulting from an early decision that he wanted to win every swim, every day, in every practice. That was the immediate goal he faced at workouts: just try to win every swim, every lap, in every stroke, no matter what. Lundquist gained a reputation in swimming for being a ferocious workout swimmer, one who competed all the time, even in the warmup. He became so accustomed to winning that he entered meets knowing that he could beat these people—he had developed the habit, every day, of never losing. The short-term goal of winning this swim, in this workout, translated into his ability to win bigger and bigger races. Competition, when the day arrived for a meet, was not a shock to him, nothing at all out of the ordinary.[31]

This leads to a third and final point:

**In the pursuit of excellence, maintaining mundanity is the key psychological challenge.* In common parlance, winners don't choke. Faced with what seems to be a tremendous challenge or a strikingly unusual event such as the Olympic Games, the better athletes take it as a normal, manageable situation[32] ("It's just another swim meet," is a phrase sometimes used by top swimmers at a major event such as the Games) and do what is necessary to deal with it. Standard rituals (such as the warmup, the psych, the visualization of the race, the taking off of sweats, and the like) are ways of importing one's daily habits into the novel situation, to make it as normal an event as possible. Swimmers like Lundquist who train at competition-

[30] For an application of this notion to college education, see Chambliss and Ryan, 1988.

[31] Interview notes.

[32] An interesting parallel: some of the most successful generals have no trouble sleeping before and after major battles. For details on Ulysses Grant and the Duke of Wellington, see Keegan, p. 207.

level intensity therefore have an advantage: arriving at a meet, they are already accustomed to doing turns correctly, taking legal starts, doing a proper warmup, and being aggressive from the outset of the competition. If each day of the season is approached with a seriousness of purpose, then the big meet will not come as a shock. The athlete will believe "I belong here, this is my world"—and not be paralyzed by fear or self-consciousness. The task then is to have training closely approximate competition conditions.

Consider the problem of "maintaining mundanity" in other professions:

(1) An actor in a play is called upon to walk on stage, go to a table and pick up a telephone. On opening night, a novice performer will be nervous—but why? Surely walking across a room and answering a telephone are almost prototypically mundane events. But the actor's challenge is to maintain a sense of mundanity while under abnormal conditions: in Schutzian terms (Schutz 1971), actors make the normally taken-for-granted world appear taken-for-granted, even when it is not. Rehearsals, especially the "competition intensity" dress rehearsals, are a device for easing the transition into the extra-mundane.

(2) A college commencement speaker finds himself asked to speak before an audience of thousands. He believes that somehow this larger audience requires a larger message, that he must be a superhuman to speak to them, with a message grand and inspiring—and he panics. But the most successful such speakers are those who enjoy speaking, or who at least can maintain their composure, who keep their sense that this is just another speech, and not a life-changing event. They joke with the audience, they stand at ease at the podium, implicitly recalling how many speeches they have made or how many this audience has heard; and they know that sometimes the very best speeches are delivered in the belief that "the world will little note nor long remember what we say here."[33]

(3) Perhaps I could suggest a final, more personal example of failing to maintain a sense of mundanity, from the world of academia: the inability to finish the doctoral thesis, the hopeless struggle for the *magnum opus*. Upon my arrival to graduate school some 12 years ago, I was introduced to an advanced student we will call Michael. Michael was very bright, very well thought of by his professors, and very hard working, claiming (apparently truthfully) to log a minimum of twelve hours a day at his studies. Senior scholars sought out his comments on their manuscripts, and their acknowledgements always mentioned him by name. All the signs pointed to a successful career. Yet seven years later, when I left the university, Michael was still there—still working 12 hours a day, only a bit less well thought of. At last report[34], there he remains, toiling away: "finishing up," in the common expression.

In our terms, Michael could not maintain his sense of mundanity. He never accepted that a dissertation is a mundane piece of work, nothing more than some words which one person writes and a few other people read. He hasn't learned that the real exams, the true tests (such as the dissertation requirement) in graduate school are really designed to discover whether at some point one is willing just to turn the damn thing in.

The mundanity of excellence is typically unrecognized. I think the reason is fairly simple. Usually we see great athletes only after they have become great—after the years of learning the new methods, gaining the habits of competitiveness and consistency, after becoming comfortable in their world. They have long since perfected the myriad of techniques that together constitute excellence. Ignorant of all of the specific steps that have led to the performance and to the confidence, we think that somehow excellence sprang fullgrown from this person, and we say he or she "has talent" or "is gifted." Even when seen close up, the mundanity of excellence is often not believed:

> Every week at the Mission Viejo training pool, where the National Champion Nada-

[33] For the forgetful reader, the phrase comes from Lincoln's Gettysburg address.

[34] Admittedly not first-hand.

> dores team practiced, coaches from around the world would be on the deck visiting, watching as the team did their workouts, swimming back and forth for hours. The visiting coaches would be excited at first, just to be here; then, soon—within an hour or so, usually—they grew bored, walking back and forth looking at the deck, glancing around at the hills around the town, reading the bulletin boards, glancing down at their watches, wondering, after the long flight out to California, when something dramatic was going to happen. "They all have to come to Mecca, and see what we do," coach Mark Schubert said. "They think we have some big secret." (Field notes)

But of course there is no secret; there is only the doing of all those little things, each one done correctly, time and again, until excellence in every detail becomes a firmly ingrained habit, an ordinary part of one's everyday life.

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis suggests that we have overlooked a fundamental fact about Olympic-class athletes; and the argument may apply far more widely than swimming, or sports. I suggest that it applies to success in business, politics, and academics, in dentistry, bookkeeping, food service, speechmaking, electrical engineering, selling insurance (when the clients are upset, you climb in the car and go out there to talk with them) and perhaps even in the arts.[35] Consider again the major points:

1) *Excellence is a qualitative phenomenon.* Doing more does not equal doing better. High performers focus on qualitative, not quantitative, improvements; it is qualitative improvements which produce significant changes in level of achievement; different levels of achievement really are distinct, and in fact reflect vastly different habits, values, and goals.

2) *Talent is a useless concept.* Varying conceptions of natural ability ("talent," e.g.) tend to mystify excellence, treating it as the inherent possession of a few; they mask the concrete actions that create outstanding performance; they avoid the work of empirical analysis and logical explanations (clear definitions, separable independent and dependent variables, and at least an attempt at establishing the temporal priority of the cause); and finally, such conceptions perpetuate the sense of innate psychological differences between high performers and other people.

3) *Excellence is mundane.* Excellence is accomplished through the doing of actions, ordinary in themselves, performed consistently and carefully, habitualized, compounded together, added up over time. While these actions are "qualitatively different" from those of performers at other levels, these differences are neither unmanageable nor, taken one step at a time, terribly difficult. Mary T. Meagher came to practice on time; some writers always work for three hours each morning, before beginning anything else; a businessperson may go ahead and make that tough phone call; a job applicant writes one more letter; a runner decides, against the odds, to enter the race; a county commissioner submits a petition to run for Congress; a teenager asks for a date; an actor attends one more audition. Every time a decision comes up, the qualitatively "correct" choice will be made. The action, in itself, is nothing special; the care and consistency with which it is made is.

Howard Becker has presented a similar argument about the ordinariness of apparently unusual people in his book *Outsiders* (1961). But where he speaks of deviance, I would speak of excellence. Becker says, and I concur:

> We ought not to view it as something special, as depraved or in some magical way better than other kinds of behavior. We ought to see it simply as a kind of behavior some disapprove of and others value, studying the processes by which either or both perspectives are built up and maintained. Perhaps the best surety against either extreme is close contact with the people we study (Becker, p. 176).

[35] Professor Margaret Bates, an opera enthusiast, tells me that this "mundanity of excellence" argument applies nicely to Enrico Caruso, the great singer, who carefully perfected each ordinary detail of his performance in an effort to overcome a recognized lack of "natural ability."

After three years of field work with world-class swimmers, having the kind of close contact that Becker recommends, I wrote a draft of some book chapters, full of stories about swimmers, and I showed it to a friend, "You need to jazz it up," he said. "You need to make these people more interesting. The analysis is nice, but except for the fact that these are good swimmers, there isn't much else exciting to say about them as individuals." He was right, of course. What these athletes do was rather interesting, but the people themselves were only fast swimmers, who did the particular things one does to swim fast. It is all very mundane. When my friend said that they weren't exciting, my best answer could only be, simply put: *That's the point.*

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