

Listening (Script)

You will hear part of a radio interview with an author called Mickey Smith, who is talking about becoming excellent at sport. For Questions 1–7, choose the best answer (A, B or C).

You now have 1 minute to look at this task.

F: Today on the programme we have Mickey Smith, author of the book *The Power of Practice*. Mickey, in your book you talk about what makes a champion sportsperson. Your argument is that talent – a natural aptitude or skill – doesn't exist. Right?

M: Right. I know that's controversial because it's thought that people are born with natural abilities. I have my critics but the evidence from research I've done backs up my argument. If you look at anyone who's reached a high level in any complex task, you'll find they've spent many years building up to it. This has started other people thinking and doing their own research. I've no doubt they'll reach the same conclusions I have.

F: What about physical abilities like speed? Isn't that what makes one footballer better than another, for example?

M: There are physical issues that are significant in some activities. However, in virtually all complex tasks the limiting factor is a mental thing. People don't become the greatest footballers because they move around the pitch quickly. While he may not realise it, the way a great footballer understands where his teammates are around him on the field is what helps him score goals, rather than speed.

F: In your book you also talk about geographical areas where lots of people become experts in the same activity. Gymnastics, for example.

M: The town I grew up in produced the top gymnasts of my generation, myself included. My initial reaction when I got to the top was, 'Wow', I must have been born with this ability to do gymnastics. But what about the others? What I now understand is that this excellence was down to having access to a fantastic coach and a 7-day-a-week gymnastics club, where we transformed ourselves from ordinary to extraordinary. Opportunity's another factor determining success.

F: Your argument is that to become excellent you have to practise for thousands of hours. That's a lot of training.

M: That's right. How successful you are is down to how long you're prepared to work. Evidence suggests those who make it believe excellence relies on practice. If you believe being good at something is down to natural ability, when you fail, you'll think you don't have enough of it – and you're more likely to give up. If you believe excellence is about effort, when you fail you're going to see it as an opportunity to grow.

F: What approach should coaches take when training youngsters in sport?

M: The way to go about it is to ensure the child enjoys what they're learning – that it becomes an internal desire to progress. Coaching young people is more about psychology than it is about the technical side of things – it's making the young performer really care about where they're going, motivating them in the right way, that will enable them to actually get there – little difference from how you encourage adults really.

F: Why don't more people who play sport try harder to improve?

M: Well, they see sports stars and assume they were born brilliant, but there's no evidence to suggest that. You just don't see the painstaking process it took to get them there when they're winning games on your TV screen. If you did, their brilliance wouldn't seem so miraculous. The illusion is to think they got there quickly and think 'Oh my goodness, I could never get up that slope.'

F: Given everything you've said about top performers, why do they sometimes fail at crucial moments? That's called 'choking', right?

M: Yes. It's to do with the expectation to succeed, no matter how many times they've done it before. When you first practise a skill you have to exert conscious control over it. When you become proficient you're able to do it subconsciously. When you choke you become so anxious that instead of delivering your skill automatically, you become conscious of what you're doing and it's like you've never done it before.

F: Thank you very much [FADE]