

THE LONG GAME

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“The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.”

Leo Tolstoy

When people ask how long it will take to “get in shape,” my brain usually goes into spasm, and my right eye starts to twitch. That’s bad enough, but things get even worse when a fitness pundit offers up an easy answer. At this point, my entire nervous system starts coming apart at the seams. Obviously, to me at least, the question betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the matter at hand. And the answer, when it comes in the form of a specific number of minutes, days, weeks or months, sounds like a formula cooked up by a marketing consultant, not a teacher or a coach.

This thing we call “getting in shape” is a process. It is not a commodity that we can buy or a destination that we can arrive at. Our bodies are fundamentally dynamic and they’re living in a dynamic world. We are plastic beings, always under construction, deconstruction and transformation. To suggest that a human or animal body could ever reach a static, utopian goal state (“in shape”) is misguided, possibly even delusional. Heraclitus would agree: We can’t step into the same river twice. Not only is the river changing, so is our body-mind-spirit. The movement never stops.

Given our dynamic predicament, what we need is a philosophy of training and living that is fundamentally open-ended, continuous and sustainable, something that lives and breathes. Fortunately, we are beginning to see some moves in this direction. There’s a lot of talk nowadays about something called “long-term athletic development.” Coaches and trainers have come to the conclusion that short-term, single-season training is not enough to transform young athletes into high performers and they’re looking to extend the time line from months to decades. Many common estimates now hold that it takes some 10,000 hours or 10 years of concentrated effort to achieve mastery in athletics, or any other art for that matter.

Long-term athletic development is a great idea and well worth our attention, but it gets even more fascinating when we expand the notion and use the body as a touchstone for training and mastery in other realms of creativity. If we begin with “long-term athletic development,” we can just as easily imagine any of the following variations:

“Long-term artistic development”

“Long-term creative development”

“Long-term musical development”

“Long-term professional development”

“Long-term personal development”

After all, isn't it all the same thing? When you get right down to it, all of these pursuits share similar characteristics of experience, challenge, relationship and learning. No matter whether you're immersing yourself in martial art, baseball, sculpture, painting, keyboards, guitar, management or writing, there's bound to be a similar process at the core. In fact, we can simply drop the particulars and simply refer to the process as “long-term development” or LTD.

The ancients (any pre-Twitter generation) knew that LTD was essential; the whole LT orientation was built into the fabric of native and traditional cultures. No one took an online course or a weekend workshop on how to become a better hunter. (“Learn how to be a master hunter in 6 minutes! Call now!”) The process required sustained immersion, participation and focused attention, over the course of years. Later, the arts took a similar path with LT apprenticeships in scholarship, blacksmithing, martial art, dance, painting, sculpture, medicine and music. If you want to learn a thing, you've got to get into it and stay into it for a very long time. There was no instant education in the paleo or the Renaissance.

A DYING ART

Sadly, LTD is fast disappearing from the modern world. Indeed, our culture is profoundly toxic to LTD of any kind. The usual culprits are familiar: technology, media and marketing, the urgent and obsessive quest for instant gratification. We know all this, and yet we seem incapable of slowing the pace. We are locked in a tightening grip of vicious cycles that feed off one another, destroying our attention and our development. Computers drive the illusion that, whatever we want, there's a way to have it instantly

Of course, it scarcely needs to be pointed out that the modern health and fitness industry is notoriously hostile to LTD. In a speed-crazed world of “6 minute abs” and “short cuts to a hot bod,” there's almost no way to have a conversation about what really matters: sustainable participation over the course of decades. Can anyone imagine a magazine or website headline that reads “Thirty years to a life of vitality and performance!” Or “Ten thousand hours of authentic work for a hot bod!”) If we were really honest about what it takes to “get in shape,” our clients and customers would flee in droves, clicking their way to impossible promises of instant make-over and fitness stardom. False promises would rule the day.

THE BASICS OF LTD

For much of human history, LTD has been the norm, but in the modern world, many of us have no sense of it whatsoever. Raised in a culture of dabbling, skimming and short-term test prep, the average person is familiar only with STD, if that. Consequently, it's time to review the basic characteristics and qualities of LTD:

Without fail, LTD is built on a base of consistent participation over the course of years and decades. This sustained engagement is essential and cannot be compromised. LTD is not a "drop-in" process. It is not "a convenient program for busy people." Rather, it's a commitment that requires lots of time, day in and day out. Martial art teachers refer to this vital ingredient as "time on the mat." There is no short cut or bypass.

LTD also requires a sense of personal and psychological identification with the process at hand; a merger and a commitment to a complete way of living. The student declares with confidence: "I am a dancer." "I am an athlete." "I am a physician." This is who I am.

A famous study of successful musicians revealed the power of personal identification and commitment. Researchers interviewed young musicians and probed their early childhood experiences, looking for the determinants of success. Some factors were obvious: practice time correlated strongly with success, for example. But even more powerful was the student's early answer to this question: "How long will you play your instrument?" Students who answered "For the rest of my life" consistently out-performed those who imagined a shorter commitment.

Naturally, LTD is fueled by a growth orientation. This mindset, championed by psychologist Carol Dweck, simply refers to the belief that skill, intelligence and aptitudes are not static qualities. Rather, they can be developed over time, especially in response to intentional effort and repetition. Numerous studies in various learning environments clearly demonstrate a placebo-like effect. In other words, if you believe that your skill and aptitude will grow in response to challenge and effort, they will.

LTD is a serious study, but it also includes a high level of playful exploration and light-hearted fun. High performers focus on the material and come at it from every angle that they can think of. They grind away at the problem with sets and reps, repeating the process over and over again until they get it right. But they'll dance with it too, turning it over, around and upside down. Many settle into a rhythm that oscillates between freedom and discipline, between gravity and levity, between broad and narrow.

In any case, all LTD is built on the sustained and rhythmic application of mindful attention to the subtleties of the craft, the discipline and the process. It makes no difference whether it's cooking or combat, fly fishing or finance, mastery always comes down to focusing attention consistently on the process, relationship and experience. In this way, LTD could also be described as "long-term attentional development."

LTD also includes (and develops) a sense of resilience, the ability to bounce back from setbacks, injury, illness and humiliation. Genuine creativity demands risk and risk exposes us to failure and folly. Every true creator has stumbled and crashed, but the sense of commitment and resilience brings them back into the process.

Finally, LTD is powered by optimism and by dreams. The young athlete, student or artist falls in love with an idea and wonders “How can I do that?” “I want that experience.” “I want to feel that in my body.” Ultimately, you’ve got to be in love with the process. If you’re not in love, you need to find another art.

A CALL FOR RADICAL HONESTY

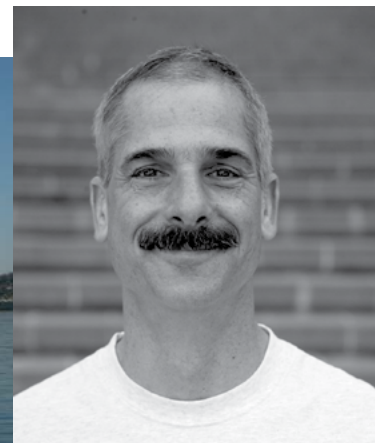
So that is LTD. We know what it takes to transform the body and it’s time to start teaching it to our clients, our customers, our friends and families. And it’s time to start telling the truth. No more “6 minute abs” or “6 minute anything” for that matter. Instead, we need to be crystal clear about what’s really required. That is, “getting in shape is going to take the rest of your life.” If we all start telling this truth, we can transform this industry and bring some meaning and dignity back into the process.

ABOUT EXUBERANT ANIMAL

Exuberant Animal is an innovative health leadership organization that promotes performance, team cohesion and physical happiness. We offer a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach that's invigorating, liberating and intensely meaningful.

Exuberant Animal is the creation of Frank Forencich, author of *Play as if Your Life Depends on It*, *Exuberant Animal* and *Change Your Body, Change the World*. Frank is an internationally-recognized leader in health education and performance training. He earned his B.A. at Stanford University in human biology and neuroscience and has over 30 years teaching experience in health promotion. He holds black belt rankings in both karate and aikido and has consulted to major corporations, human resource groups and health professionals.

- Partner at The National Institute for Play
- Expert consultant to WildFitness UK
- Featured presenter: First Annual Conference on The State of Play Science, October 31- November 1, 2008, Stanford University.
- Guest lecturer: Stanford University Institute of Design, April 2009 and 2010
- Featured presenter: National Applied Functional Physical Education Conference, October 2009



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