

Be Who You Are. Do What You Can.

On talent, freedom and performing to your ability

For much of my life, I have been fascinated by performance. That fascination began in sports, first as an athlete and later in working with athletes and other people who have to perform when something matters.

We often speak about performance as if the answer were simple: work harder, prepare better, become stronger, stay focused. And there is truth in that. Excellence requires effort. Knowledge has to be acquired, skills have to be practiced and experience takes time. There is no shortcut around preparation.

But preparation is only part of the story.

At some point, another question becomes important. When the moment arrives, are we free enough to use what we have acquired? Can what is present actually become available, or does pressure make us smaller than we need to be?

That distinction has become central to the way I understand performance.

Talent is not the same as skill

Talent and skill are often spoken about as if they were interchangeable, but I see an important difference between them.

Talent refers to possibilities we seem to bring with us. We are not all born with the same capacities. One person may have an exceptional sense of rhythm, another a natural feel for movement, language, spatial awareness or human interaction. Talent creates potential, but it does not guarantee what will eventually become possible.

Skills are acquired. They require learning, repetition, correction and experience. A basketball player may have extraordinary physical talent, but still needs thousands of hours to develop technique and game understanding. A musician may have a remarkable ear, but mastery still requires practice. The same applies in medicine, leadership, teaching or any other demanding field.

This distinction matters because development involves both realities. We can refine what our natural possibilities allow, and we can acquire abilities that were not there before. But there are limits as well. No amount of determination can give every person the same talent, and no amount of positive thinking can replace the work required to become skilled.

For me, there is something liberating in acknowledging that reality. We do not have to be capable of everything. The question is not whether we can become anything we want.

The more meaningful question is what can become possible with what is genuinely ours.

When ability becomes available

Once someone has acquired a high level of skill, the nature of performance begins to change. During learning, conscious attention is essential. We analyze, correct, repeat and think about what we are doing. But with enough practice, many aspects of a skill become increasingly familiar and require less conscious control.

That is exactly what we need. Imagine having to consciously calculate every movement while playing basketball, every finger position while playing the piano or every word while giving a presentation. Skilled performance depends partly on our ability to rely on what has become familiar through practice.

Pressure can disturb that relationship.

When something matters deeply, attention can shift away from the task and toward ourselves. We become aware of the possible outcome, of how others may judge us or of what failure could mean. Movements that normally happen naturally may suddenly receive conscious attention. We begin to interfere with abilities that usually need very little help from us.

Nothing has necessarily disappeared. The talent is still there. The acquired skill is still there. But access has changed.

This is one of the paradoxes of performance: sometimes trying harder can make less available.

Pressure is not the enemy

It would be easy to conclude that pressure is the problem. I do not think it is.

Pressure belongs to situations that matter. A decisive game feels different from a training session precisely because something is at stake. An important presentation, a difficult conversation or a crucial decision may affect us because we care about the outcome.

Our bodies respond accordingly. Heart rate may increase, breathing may change, muscles may become more tense and attention may narrow. None of this automatically means we will perform poorly. These responses can also prepare us for action.

The difficulty begins when we become preoccupied with our response to pressure. We may interpret tension as evidence that we are not ready. Fear becomes something we have to eliminate. We start monitoring ourselves instead of remaining available to the situation.

The struggle then shifts. We are no longer only performing the task in front of us; we are simultaneously trying to control ourselves while doing it.

That costs freedom.

Freedom is not the absence of tension

When I speak about freedom in performance, I do not mean complete relaxation or the absence of fear. Some of the most meaningful moments in sports, work and life come with considerable tension.

Freedom means something else.

It is the ability to remain sufficiently available to what the situation asks of us, even while we are affected by it. We may feel nervous and still act. We may experience doubt and still trust our preparation. We may care deeply about the outcome without allowing that outcome to occupy all of our attention.

This is why confidence, for me, is not the certainty that everything will go well. That certainty does not exist.

Confidence is closer to trust: the willingness to enter the moment with what we have, knowing that we cannot completely control what will happen.

That kind of trust does not replace preparation. It depends on it.

Flow cannot be forced

Athletes sometimes describe extraordinary moments in which the game seems to slow down, decisions arise almost by themselves and movement feels effortless. Musicians, artists and other performers describe similar experiences. Attention is fully absorbed in the activity and there seems to be very little distance between perceiving what is needed and responding to it.

We often call this *flow*.

Flow is fascinating precisely because it cannot simply be commanded. The moment we start asking ourselves whether we are in flow, we have already stepped partly outside the experience.

We can prepare for performance, but we cannot force freedom to appear. What we can do is help create circumstances in which less stands in the way: sufficient preparation, trust, attention to the present and an environment in which mistakes do not immediately threaten our entire sense of self.

At our best, we are not becoming more talented in that moment. We are allowing more of what has already been acquired to become available.

Be who you are

There is another side to performance that interests me just as much.

Our culture often encourages us to exceed ourselves. To become more successful, more productive, stronger and better than we were yesterday. Ambition can be a wonderful force. It can invite us to discover possibilities we did not yet know we had.

But ambition becomes problematic when it begins with a rejection of reality.

We all have talents and limitations. We have different bodies, histories, temperaments and possibilities. Sustainable development begins, for me, with becoming increasingly familiar with that reality rather than constantly comparing ourselves with someone else's.

Being who you are does not mean remaining exactly as you are. It does not mean giving up ambition or accepting every limitation without question. It means beginning from what is actually there.

Only from reality can genuine development begin.

Do what you can

Once we stop demanding that we become someone else, another question becomes possible: what can I actually do with what has been given to me and with what I have acquired?

That is a very different question from asking whether I am good enough.

It invites responsibility. Talent that is never practiced remains potential. Knowledge that is never used changes little. A possibility only becomes meaningful when we do something with it.

But *do what you can* also contains a boundary. It does not say *do everything*. It does not say *never fail*. And it does not say that effort guarantees the result we hope for.

We can prepare, commit ourselves and perform to the best of our ability while still losing the game, missing the opportunity or discovering that someone else was simply better.

That does not make the performance meaningless.

The result matters, but it is not the only measure of what happened.

Performing to your ability

Perhaps this is why I increasingly prefer the idea of *performing to your ability*.

It holds ambition and acceptance together.

Acceptance without ambition can become resignation. Ambition without acceptance can become a lifelong battle with who we actually are. But when the two meet, something else becomes possible. We can take our possibilities seriously without demanding that they make us more than we are.

My work with people under pressure is therefore rarely about making them more talented. Nor is it usually about teaching the technical skills of their profession or sport. Coaches, teachers and specialists are better equipped for that.

My contribution begins where pressure affects access. What happens when the stakes rise? What becomes tense? Where does attention go? When does conscious control begin to interfere with what has already been acquired? And what is needed for someone to remain sufficiently free to respond to the moment?

Sometimes the work is not about adding another ability.

It is about creating enough freedom for existing ability to become visible.

Be who you are. Do what you can.

The longer I have worked with performance, the less interested I have become in the idea of becoming more than we are.

That does not mean I have become less ambitious. Perhaps the opposite is true.

There is something deeply ambitious about wanting to discover what can genuinely become possible when talent, acquired skill, commitment and freedom come together. Not someone else's possibilities. Not an imagined version of ourselves. Our own.

We cannot completely control the result. We cannot guarantee success. And we cannot become everything we might wish to be.

But we can become increasingly familiar with who we are. We can take responsibility for what we have been given and what we have acquired. And we can create the conditions in which those possibilities have the greatest chance of becoming available when they matter.

Perhaps that is enough of an ambition.

Be who you are. Do what you can.