

ELSP 505

Unit 3: Are the Olympics a Model for Creating Geniuses?

The Idea Channel, PBS

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PE-vSjh0N_A&list=PL69BD06CC757E1D61&index=2&feature=plcp

Transcript

Here's an idea: the Olympics are a model for fostering genius. Unless you live under a rock, I probably don't have to describe the Olympics to you. And if you do live under a rock, dude, get back underneath that rock – it is weird and scary out here.

Every 4 years, the world's most accomplished geniuses get together and engage in what amounts to an epic battle over precious medals. Oh, and of course the pleasure of saying they're the world's best female freestyle-whitewater slalom-javeline toss-shotput - er Wait, did I hear myself correctly? Let's go to the replay: "*the Olympics are a model for fostering genius*". Really? "*Genius*"?

The word genius usually brings to mind particular statistically improbable intellectual achievers — people like Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Mozart and Simone de Beauvoir — not people like Michael Phelps, Kerri Strug, Usain Bolt or Missy Franklin. But for both classical geniuses in the sciences, math and the arts, and athletic geniuses, not only is their goal the same – pushing the boundary of their field – but their brains tend to exhibit really similar characteristics.

A mathematics genius expends very little neural energy on doing simple calculations, and an athletic genius very little on doing simple physical tasks. And each seems capable of entering a kind of 'fugue state' (not like that one that Walter has in "Breaking Bad"), a good kind where a high level of performance is reached with just a minimum of conscious effort. You might know it by its true name: The Zone. The brains of both also respond really similarly to practice, physically strengthening and broadening connections in often-used neural regions of 'the thinking place'.

Frankly, all of this sounds pretty different from our commonly held idea of genius, which is a rare fleeting talent springing up out of nowhere who, against all odds, selflessly contributes to bettering the world, (you know, like Jeff Goldblum in "Independence Day" – he gave an alien spaceship a computer virus. I'm willing to bet that's difficult to do).

Genius can't be like athletics — developed through training and support. It just doesn't work that way....or does it?

It turns out it might work that way exactly. Genius tends to cluster in times and places that encourage its development. Duke University stats professor David Banks points out three periods in three cities that were powerhouses of genius: 4th century Athens gave us Aristotle, Plato, and Pythagoras; 15th century Florence gave us the Ninja Turtles*; and 17th century London gave us Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Bacon -- both the Empiricist and the tasty breakfast meat. (If there were a Bacon Olympics, London would take home the gold).

Professor Banks said that these eras had specific characteristics that encouraged the growth of genius: a perfect balance of peaceful boom times, a cultural emphasis on education, like-minded cohesive social groups, and most importantly, economic support. And while, right now at least, our economy isn't funding the arts, philosophy or even the sciences as much as it used to, there is a massive economy supporting sports and the Olympics.

Earlier this year, *Wired* columnist and Bob Dylan quote expert Jonah Lehrer pointed out that at the intersection of Professor Banks' work and the work of Bill James – Bill James being the guy who is most famous for developing sabermetrics, or, you know, *Moneyball* – is the idea that we, right now, are training a whole mess of athletic geniuses. In his book *Solid Fools' Gold*, James says “our society is very, very good at developing certain types of skills, and certain types of genius; we are fantastically good at identifying and developing athletic skills better than we are really at almost anything else”.

This is the case because we, as a nation of fast-food aficionados oddly enough, love sports. We always want new athletes and new athletic inspiration, and we are willing to pay for it. And as a result, we have a plethora of genius-level athletes. We are constantly breaking records that, at the time they were set, seemed insane, like in 1954, Sir Roger Bannister was the first person to complete a sub-4 minute mile, which is now the standard for male middle-distance runners, the *standard*. And in gymnastics, we went from this....to this.

Imagine if we made these kinds of advancements in science or engineering, in 50 years, we could have a colony on Mars, or hoverboards. So, whether we're talking about the arts, sciences, philosophy, architecture, or otherwise, if we want to be encouraging the development of genius, we have plenty to learn from the Olympics.

What do you guys think? Can a society purposefully create geniuses?
Let us know in the comments. [stop]

* *Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, and Donatello*