Olympians and Vampires
Talent, Practice, and Why Most of Us 'Don't Get It'

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Abstract

Why do some people become WNBA champions or Olympic gold medalists and others do not? What is 'special' about those very few incredibly skilled athletes, and why do *they,* in particular, get to be special? In this paper, I attempt to make sense of the relationship that there is, in the case of sports champions, between so-called 'talent', i.e. natural predisposition for particular physical activities and high-pressure competition, and practice/training. I will articulate what I take to be the 'mechanism' that allows certain people to rise to the Olympus of athletic excellence, and what being part of this elite club 'feels like'. My proposal is based on the idea that so-called talent and practice interact in complex and unsystematic ways. I will also argue that becoming a top athlete involves undergoing a special kind of transformation, which makes such people qualitatively different from any 'normal' sport amateur, even when the difference might not be immediately visible to the 'untrained' eye.

Keywords: Sport, Talent, Practice, Athlete, Transformative experience.

1. Introduction

Cecilia Zandalasini is a 24-year-old Italian basketball player. When you watch her take a jump shot, all you can think about is that she is doing exactly what, if God existed, her assigned mission on Earth would be. Mikaela Shiffrin is a 25-year-old American alpine skier. When you watch her do a slalom run, you feel the way Cimabue must have felt watching his student Giotto draw a perfect circle, freehand. These are only two examples of exceptional athletes about whom you can't help wondering: they most definitely have a huge amount of talent, and surely they have been working extremely hard… but is this supposed to be enough to explain what they can accomplish on the court or on the snow?

In this paper, I attempt to make sense of the relationship that there is, in the case of sports champions, between so-called 'talent', i.e. natural predisposition for

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particular physical activities and high-pressure competition, and practice/training.[1] In particular, I explore the possibility that our ordinary way to understand and relate such notions to each other is too simplistic and does not fully explain why certain people are so exceptionally good at a sport. I start by trying to articulate the folk conceptions of talent and practice. Then, I argue that the folk conception does not have the right resources to capture the complex ways in which talent and practice combine and influence each other. Next, after I have examined a few other proposals, I present my own view, rooted in the notion of 'continuous reward cycle' (CRC). The CRC articulates the dynamic interaction of talent and practice characteristic of exceptional athletes, thereby suggesting a possible explanation of why they 'feel' so far away from us 'mere mortals'.[2] Because of the unique way in which talent and practice interact within the CRC, I also argue that being a sports champion involves a radical *transformation* of one's entire practical way of being. As a consequence, it is part of my view that, to fully understand what it is like to be an exceptional athlete, one must *be* such an athlete.[3]

2. Defining 'Talent' and 'Practice'

What does it mean to say that someone has *talent* in the context of a particular sport or game? The folk conception of talent seems to involve at least two components, and it is common to understand them as being innate, or, in other words, much more dependent on 'nature' than 'nurture' (the expression 'that kid is a natural!' speaks for itself). The first component is, of course, physical: one is born with certain bodily traits (e.g. height, fast reflexes, long limbs, very good coordination, etc.), and

[1] In a recent essay on a similar topic, David Papineau (2017) argues for the importance of a third component when it comes to understanding how a top athlete is 'created', especially with respect to 'niche' sports such as cricket or fencing, namely family tradition. Papineau points out that the skills required by certain sports may not be easily acquired 'in the wild' (compare soccer to fencing, for example: every child gets a chance to kick a ball around at least once in their lifetime, but how many kids have spontaneous access to the equipment and facilities needed for fencing unless their families make that happen?), and thus that, in addition to the innate/genetic component and the willingness to train hard, the kind of family an athlete grows up in matters a whole lot. I absolutely agree with Papineau on this point, although for the sake of this paper I am going to bracket the 'family tradition' component and focus exclusively on the relationship between talent and practice.

[2] With this, I don't mean to suggest either that 'mere mortals' cannot have a very good understanding of the elite athlete experience, or that every elite athlete is 'in touch' with her experience in the desired way. It is obviously true that sometimes the best coaches, for instance, understand their sport to an astonishing degree, and most of them have not been top professional athletes themselves. Similarly, it is also clearly true that many top athletes aren't very good at understanding their own experience (e.g. Montero 2016), or the one of other athletes at the same level. In this respect, the way in which basketball legend Julius Erving spoke to another legend of the sport, Michael Jordan, is quite telling: "You seem to operate in a zone that seems to be reserved only for you… What's it like when you're there, Mike?" (Lazenby 2014). However, two things should be noted. First, understanding the sport 'in theory' is importantly different from understanding one's experience while performing (competing, practicing, etc.). Second, just because most athletes cannot fully *articulate* or describe what it's like to be them in the relevant way, this doesn't really speak against their having a special kind of understanding that might be entirely impossible to put into words in an exhaustive way.

[3] I would like to thank the two anonymous referees whose feedback and suggestions helped me make the paper more rigorous and the arguments more sophisticated.

these traits combine in a way that is congenial to a certain sport or game (e.g. basketball requires height and long arms, though those traits may not be ideal if one wants to excel in, e.g., gymnastics). The second component is psychological: one has the type of personality which handles pressure well, thrives in highly competitive contexts, can quickly turn failure into motivation, and so forth.

Some might argue that this psychological component should not be considered innate, and therefore intuitively not part of what talent usually means. For instance, a lot of top athletes turn to sport psychologists or motivational coaches; these professionals teach them various techniques to handle issues like pressure from the media, performance anxiety, recovery after injuries, etc. This seems to suggest that the mental strength of sport champions is in fact something that can be learned, and which, therefore, should be listed as part of what practice and training consist in, rather than part of so-called 'natural talent'. For example, Matthew Syed argues that what he calls the "growth mindset" (Syed 2010: 115), i.e. the psychological capacity to see the obstacles on the 'path to excellence' not as failures but as signs of constant improvement and sources of motivation to work even harder, is, in fact, learned and trainable, and has nothing to do with innate talent:

> She [2006 Olympic figure skating gold-medalist Shizuka Arakawa] interpreted falling down not merely as a means of improving, but as evidence that she was improving. Failure was not something that sapped her energy and vitality, but something that provided her with an opportunity to learn, develop, and adapt (Syed 2010: 119).

Syed thinks that Arakawa, and sports champions in general, achieved their remarkable successes thanks to their ability to mentally push themselves beyond their physical limits and to look at mistakes in a positive light. These abilities, according to Syed, are paradigmatically *not* part of the folk notion of innate talent. Syed's view seems consistent with a conception of training as challenge, as necessarily hard and full of failures, which one can then *learn* to find intrinsic value in. This idea was central to the Stoic doctrine and approach to life, for instance:

> Effort played a central role in Stoic ascetics and they did not regard it as a negative thing to be avoided. Effort and struggle can be meaningful and even intrinsic goods, and in Foucault's analysis this was an important educative aspect of Stoic ascetics where tests, misfortunes, suffering and difficulties should not be considered as evils but as goods (Aggerholm 2016: 354).

Russell makes a similar point about the human virtue of *resilience* and the fact that failure, defeat, and all the difficult situations an athlete has to overcome are *constitutive* of the nature of sport itself:

> the challenges that sport presents are only interesting if they represent tests that are, and continue to be, meaningful. That is, the challenges are designed precisely because they are, and will remain, difficult to master. If I am right about this, sport is founded and draws fundamentally on the need for resilience. […] To be meaningful, indeed to be sport, the obstacles or challenges must be such that failures and setbacks are to be anticipated and can never be completely avoided. Sport requires that they be embraced for the opportunity to respond to and overcome them. […] sport exists fundamentally, if not exclusively, as an arena for testing

> resilience. It is key to sport. There is no sport without the meaningful prospect of adversity, and so sportsmen and women must be prepared to cultivate resilience and express it at nearly every turn (Russell 2015: 166).

However, does the fact that character can be 'built' through effort, setbacks, and difficulties, contradict the idea that it should be considered a natural trait? There are cases in which resilience or other virtues that play a role in the 'growth mindset' seem to be present in people from very early on and in contexts unrelated to sports, while every other aspect of their athletic excellence emerges much later. This is the case of many great athletes who, despite lacking many of the 'material' (financial, social, etc.) conditions that one usually associates with excellence and success, manage to overcome obstacles, defeat the odds, and claw their way to the big stage, all thanks to tremendous willpower and focus.

Another category of athletes may or may not have had obstacles to overcome early in life due to their socio-economic situation, but nonetheless managed to succeed and excel mostly thanks to outstanding dedication and hard work. These are the so-called 'late-bloomers', who went through early frustrations and doubts about whether they really had what it takes, but trained so hard and were willing to make so many sacrifices to get to the top that they literally 'changed their body' and improved their skill through disciplined, excruciating work. They did not give up. They believed that they could make it, and they did.[4]

As these examples suggest, the 'growth mindset' and, more generally, the psychological traits and dispositions that one quite reliably finds in sport champions do not fit perfectly either in the 'innate' category or in the 'acquired' one. And to complicate things even more, cases like that of late bloomers shed some doubt on physical traits and their innateness, too. Sometimes, late bloomers simply took a bit longer to develop, perhaps through a sudden and unanticipated growth spurt over a couple of months, but such a development was already 'written' in their genes. But some other times, a late bloomer—or, perhaps more appropriately, an 'improbable bloomer'—is someone who, even lacking the physical traits that would normally favor one in a certain sport (e.g. height in basketball), worked on acquiring and improving some *other* physical trait that, once developed enough, compensated for the rest. This is the case, for instance, of someone like Muggsy Bogues, who managed to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame after 14 years in the NBA despite being only 160 cm tall and having very small hands. To compensate for that, he worked on his legs until he could jump about two thirds of his height, and on dribbling so close to the ground that virtually nobody else could reach the ball while at the same time maintaining control thanks to quick wrist movements and strong arm muscles.

The other big aspect of 'what champions are made of' is exhausting, brutal, never-ending training; in other words, the dirty hard work called *practice*. Practice is what a top athlete's life is mostly made of: whenever she is not competing, she is practicing. Practice might include physical activities that are quite far from the sport or game she is practicing for (e.g. swimmers do lots of weightlifting, alpine skiers often ride their bikes during the summer, etc.), but every activity done in the context of practice has as its ultimate goal the improvement of the athlete's

[4] In a later section, I will come back to the case of late bloomers, and I will argue that a pragmatist insight can help us make sense of their thought process and their mindset.

performance in her preferred sport. Thus, we could think of practice as a category that includes all the activities, physical or intellectual (even video-analysis sessions are practice!), which have the improvement of performance in agonistic settings (races, matches, etc.) as their goal, both individually and collectively. Let us turn now to the folk conception of the *relationship* between talent and practice.

3. The 'Additive Model' of Folk Sport Theory

In the ordinary way of speaking, talent and practice are conceived as two factors that can be summed, so that t + p = c (i.e. champion); the higher the sum, the greater the champion. I will call this the 'additive model', that is, a model in which practice is simply an addition to talent, and the two notions are separate and logically independent from one another. This, in turn, means that, *ceteris paribus,* if two people practicing the same sport have the same amount of talent, who is better depends on how hard each of them practices.[5] Vice versa, if two people practiced in the exact same way for the same amount of time, the difference in success as athletes would be exclusively dependent on how much talent they were born with.

Leaving aside once again 'material' circumstances that might affect people's success as athletes, such as bad luck with injuries, growing up in a part of the world that's peripheral to professional sports, not being able to dedicate as much time to training because of other family needs, etc., the additive model seems prima facie straightforward. In fact, it seems to genuinely capture the way we intuitively think about differences both between top athletes and between a top athlete and an average sport amateur. Without too much reflection, if we attributed the same amount of talent to two athletes in the same discipline, we would probably identify as the reason why one is more successful than the other the fact that the former practiced more, or better, than the latter.

Regarding the comparison between a champion and an 'ordinary' person, then, it seems fairly uncontroversial that, even if the two practiced in the same way for the same amount of time, the former would still be better than the latter, and this would be because of the different amounts of talent possessed: under the (unlikely) assumption that Cecilia Zandalasini and I practiced in the same way for the same number of hours every day for all our lives, the fact that I am not a basketball star while Zandalasini is seems to be explained largely by the fact that she has much more talent (physical, mental, or both). However, a corollary of the additive conception is that, if I practiced more, harder, paying attention not to take up 'bad habits', etc., I would be able to 'compensate' for my lack of talent. This seems to be how folk sport-theory understands the dynamics involved in becoming a sports champion, which include the 'romantic' idea that *anyone* can do it, as long as they want it enough.

However—and here is where the additive model shows its most obvious shortcomings—talent and practice do not run on parallel tracks and should not be considered two separate 'blocks' that can be summed and linearly combined. Quite on the contrary, talent and practice the way I have defined them earlier are

[5] This both involves how much one practices and how one practices. Practicing too much might be just as detrimental as practicing too little, since it can cause physical fatigue, which makes injuries more likely to occur, or what is known as 'mental burnout'. Moreover, practicing in the wrong kind of way might create some 'bad habits' that affect negatively the overall results of the hard work one did.

in many ways inter-dependent. The way in which 'natural' bodily features or personality traits combine with training is complex and nuanced. For starters, it is simply *not the case* that two people could *ever* train in the same exact way, precisely because training involves bodies, and bodies are all different, and change over time, partially as an effect of training itself. What I do and what Zandalasini does—exercises in the weight room, ball handling and shooting drills, etc.—might look the same from the outside, but what actually goes on in my case and in hers is very different, both in the present and in relation to the future. Secondly, talent in the way we have defined it affects training and practice effectiveness directly as well as indirectly.

Views that tried to go beyond the additive model and that acknowledge that talent and practice influence each other have been proposed before. For example, David Epstein (2013), data at hand, presents an idea which he calls the "talent of trainability". Epstein presents empirical evidence for two claims. The first is that, even though it is possible to identify an average number of hours of practice one needs to excel in a certain skill (may this be playing golf, chess, or the violin), the range of variation among individual learners is dramatically wide. For example, if one individual needed around 3,000 hours of practice to become a chess master, another individual could only reach the same level in over 25,000 hours (Epstein 2013: 21-22). Certain natural traits seem to make it the case that certain people's practice is more effective more quickly. The second claim, connected to but slightly different from the first one, is that the (presumably somewhat innate) capacity to improve fast affects the motivation to train more and more efficiently. In particular, Epstein describes a study in which young male Japanese runners have been followed during their early years of training, from age 14 to age 21. The study measured the increase of aerobic capacity (i.e. the amount of oxygen used by the body during physical activity) during seven years of training, with all the boys starting off at an almost identical level. Epstein writes:

> Over the course of their years of training, the boys all improved, but naturally divided into two groups: study group I, which saw an average aerobic capacity increase of 13 percent; and study group II, with boys who hit a plateau of 9 percent aerobic improvement—as well as a plateau of race time improvement—by age seventeen. Each of the boys in the latter group, having ceased to improve, quit running altogether after age seventeen. […] that is not to say that the boys who continued competing were just lucky. The study suggests that the more potential to improve the boys had, the longer and harder they had to work to reach it. But the ability to improve may have kept them in the sport and dedicated to training (Epstein 2013: 98-99).

Epstein's view still takes something like the folk conception of talent and shows how it has an effect on practice: it makes improvement faster, thereby boosting motivation to train more, thus improving even more, etc. But what about the effects that practice has on talent? Can we make sense of such an idea? And can a theory accommodate *both* the fact that talent affects practice and that practice affects talent?

One possibility is that we understand talent as a person's *disposition* that only manifests itself through practice, similarly to fragility being a disposition of material objects that manifests itself only in certain circumstances. On this view, prac-

tice influences talent by being a sort of 'enabler', that is, what creates the conditions in which talent can manifest itself as an externally recognizable property of an individual. Let us explore this idea in more detail.

What does it mean to say that talent is a disposition (or a dispositional property) possessed by a person? In more standard cases of dispositional properties like fragility, the notion is usually explained in counterfactual terms: an object is fragile (i.e. has the dispositional property of fragility) if, were we to put in a condition of even minimal mechanical stress, it would break. Objects like crystal glasses are fragile, and they remain fragile for the entire length of their existence, whether or not this fragility gets to manifest itself. An unbroken crystal glass has the dispositional property of fragility, i.e. the disposition to break under the appropriate circumstances; a broken crystal glass not only has the dispositional property of fragility, but it also instantiates the manifestation of such a property: the glass underwent mechanical stress and broke. Is there a way to build an analogy between the case of the fragile crystal glass and that of the talented athlete?

We could say that a person has the dispositional property of talent (with respect to a certain sport or activity) if, were the person to actually play that sport or to engage in that activity, they would be good at it in a way that suggests some innate instinct or predisposition for the activity. But this seems circular. Talent is being defined in terms of talent itself: someone is talented if, were they to engage in practice, they would manifest their talent. The problem, as I see it, lies in a conceptual asymmetry between fragility and its 'designated effect', i.e. breaking, and talent and the *absence* of a designated effect specifiable in non-question-begging terms.

A glass's fragility manifests itself in the form of breaking when the glass hits the floor. If we had to preserve the analogy, we would have to say that a person's talent manifests itself when the person practices, but… in the form of *what* exactly does it manifest itself? While fragility and breaking are clearly two distinct concepts, it is not clear that talent and 'the form in which talent manifests itself' are. Talent seems to be identical with its manifestation, because talent is a specific *way* in which a person relates to their practice. On the other hand, fragility is *not* a specific way in which a glass relates to, say, the floor.

Could it be the case that practice is the disposition that manifests itself thanks to talent? This option, though prima facie odd, fits with the idea that talent is a specific way in which a person relates to her practice, which in turn can be read as talent consisting in a series of conditions which, when met, make practice 'look' a certain way and have certain effects. Seeing talent as the 'enabler' rather than the disposition seems to make sense when combined with the idea that what talent enables are specific forms practice takes which lead to specific results. But what would the disposition manifested this way be? Recall the fragile glass example: pressure or mechanic stress enables the dispositional property of fragility to manifest itself in the form of breaking. Parallelly, talent enables the dispositional property of [x] to manifest itself in the form of, say, efficient, effective, and success-bringing practice. But putting "practice" in the 'x' slot does not seem to make sense: is practice the tendency to practice effectively when talented? Quite clearly not.

What seems to be missing is a notion that can reasonably take the place of the x in the definition above, and this is not easy to find. However, we might have already encountered a candidate earlier on: Epstein's 'talent of trainability' idea states that talent should be understood as what allows an athlete to get the most out of practice, where effective practice is itself a manifestation of such talent. Combining the dispositional view with Epstein's notion seems to get us closer to a good

account: the folk conception of talent remains, in the role of enabler, practice maintains its role of manifestation of a disposition, and Epstein's trainability idea becomes the disposition, i.e. the 'x' we were looking for. Even though this seems to work, I cannot help but seeing it as somewhat redundant: if trainability is itself a dimension of talent, then it is trivial to say that talent enables talent to manifest itself. Can we come up with something better? I think so, and we are almost there.

Perhaps, talent and practice stand in a potentiality-actuality relation, that is, talent is in potentiality what practice is in actuality, and both are ways in which a certain *power* exists and manifests itself. If such a power could be defined, then we might have something that can take the place of the x above while avoiding the redundancy. This power, in the vicinity of Epstein's trainability idea, would exist as a potentiality, which we usually call talent, and as an actuality, which we call practice. This is, indeed, what I will present next as my favored proposal.

4. The 'Continuous Reward Cycle'

In the previous section, I argued that the additive model does not have the resources to describe the complex and dynamic ways in which notions like talent and practice interact with each other and within each individual. Then, I took a brief detour into a better alternative, i.e. a version of dispositionalism, which however still falls short of capturing the relationship between talent and practice in a satisfactory way. Lastly, I conceded that seeing talent and practice as two 'moments' of a more complex power might be the right way to go. The view I favor, which I present in this section, takes this idea as a starting point and elaborates on how the dynamic interaction between talent and practice, for very few elite individuals, can result in a radical transformation and in a re-shaping of their whole practical way of being. On this view, talent and practice dynamic interaction unfolds in what I call the 'continuous reward cycle' (CRC).

The cycle consists in the following: At some (usually early) stage of learning and practicing a certain athletic discipline, something about one's 'nature' (i.e. many of the features that we included in the folk notion of talent) will start interacting with the stimuli coming from the outside (i.e. practice) so that the athlete will experience a particularly striking 'harmony' between her agential capacities and the activities she is engaging in. The athlete sees herself improving fast, and this importantly boosts her confidence in that she is 'on the right track' and keeps her motivated to keep working. Positive feedback from the outside, first-personal evidence that one is getting better and better, and the aesthetically pleasant experience of your actions harmoniously 'fitting' your abilities are extremely valuable rewards when one practices hard. And short-term, tangible rewards are crucial to sustain motivation, especially given that practicing hard takes time, energy, puts strain on personal relationships, requires travel and, in many cases, a substantial monetary investment either by the athlete herself (or her family) or by third party (a school, a foundation, etc.).

External positive feedback and first-personally experienced 'harmony of capacity'[6] are the fuel that keeps the CRC going: the athlete, motivated by the experience of harmony, which is both aesthetically pleasant and practically rewarding,

[6] The term is borrowed from (Nguyen 2020). He describes this very special experience in these terms: "This is an experience, not just of a particular action's fitting the requirements at hand. It is an experience of your whole self fitting the task. […] This experience is not

engages in practice in a more and more immersive way which ends up being *transformative.* Indeed, I suggest that once the CRC is in motion, practice's role in an athlete's overall understanding of her own agency changes, and, from 'merely' an activity the athlete engages in, it becomes the primary expression and fundamental interpretative key of the athlete's agency, the core of her practical way of 'being in the world'. Maintaining a CRC active over time 'unlocks' new ways of practicing, as well as new ways in which one's body is affected by such practice, that would not be as beneficial or even available separate from the dynamics of the cycle. Quite literally, the CRC influences an athlete's life to the point that the athlete will come to experience practice as her most authentic mode of self-expression. The athlete starts perceiving practice as fundamental to who they are, and the CRC as a source of existential meaning.

The CRC is the way in which the power whose potentiality and actuality are, respectively, talent and practice, manifests itself. Indeed, we can say that an athlete's practice and the subjective experience of her own agency during practice, i.e. the power's actuality, is *constitutively shaped* by talent, i.e. the power's potentiality. Something constitutively shapes something else if the former thing is part of what constitutes the former. Following Kalderon (2017), we can explain the idea of constitutive shaping through an example, where it is contrasted with a different kind of shaping, which he calls "causal":

> consider the way that the Nazi air campaign shaped the London skyline. The destructive impact of the bombing caused the London skyline to be shaped in a certain way. This contrasts sharply with the way that St Paul's shapes the London skyline, as Herbert Mason's iconic photograph of December 29, 1940 dramatically demonstrates. St Paul's defiantly shapes the London skyline by being part of it despite the devastating impact of the bombing campaign. Whereas the Nazi bombing shaped the London skyline in a merely causal sense, St Paul's constitutively shapes that skyline *by being a part or contour of it* (Kalderon 2017: 23-24; emphasis mine).

I suggest that we use the notion of constitutive shaping to capture the relationship between talent and practice within the CRC. Therefore, we might say that an athlete's talent constitutively shapes her practice so that the exceptional athlete and her activity form "a distinctive kind of unity" (Kalderon 2017: 75). Inside the CRC, talent and practice, the athlete and her activity, are in a kind of "communion". Talent shapes practice (and the athlete's agency which expresses itself in it) just like St Paul's shapes London's skyline: constitutively, by being part of it and forming a unity with it.

One might think that seeing talent and practice as the same power in potentiality and in actuality, and as combined in the distinctive kind of unity captured by the notion of constitutive shaping, effectively gets rid of the folk definitions of talent and practice presented in section 2. This is not necessarily a straightforward commitment of my view, as we can still maintain those definitions and simply provide a different interpretation of their relationship. However, it is not unfair to claim that my proposal, and especially the way I have described the CRC, blurs the line between the two notions. While a causal shaping relationship between

merely of one particular action fitting the solution. It is an experience of harmony between one's *overall capacities* and the demands of the practical environment. It is the sense that one's total capacities fit precisely with the demands of the world" (109).

talent and practice, similar to what dispositionalism stated, still allows for talent and practice to exist separately and independently of each other (in the sense in which the Nazi air campaign is independent of London's skyline), the notion of constitutive shaping makes talent and practice two 'moments' in the manifestation of one and the same power.

To summarize, I have argued that talent and practice, in the case of exceptional sports champions, interact and mutually influence each other in a very distinctive way, and that the best way to make sense of it is through the notions of actuality, potentiality, and constitutive shaping, as well as through the idea of the CRC. These are some key features of the CRC (in no particular order):

a) Certain natural traits (both physical and psychological), which we may or may not group under the folk notion of talent, constitutively shape the actualization of a power which, once fully actualized, *transforms* its possessor.
b) Talent boosts skill development through practice, sustains motivation and, in some cases, eases the overcoming of early frustration, failure, and disappointment.
c) Continuous rewards in the form of positive external feedback and first-person experience of one's improvement in the form of a harmonious fit between her capacities and the activities required by the practice (i.e. what Nguyen calls "harmony of capacity") provide motivation, thereby helping the athlete endure better the amount of work required, which, thanks to increased motivation, continues to change over time not only with respect to quantity (frequency, intensity, etc.) but also quality.
d) Training and practice, i.e. the power in actuality, continues to change and modify its role within the athlete's experience and understanding of her own agency. Qualitatively different kinds of activities are 'unlocked' (pretty much like more and more challenging levels of a videogame) as one continues training, ultimately having a *transformative* effect on the athlete's practical way of being.

As a conclusion, let me elaborate a bit further on this last point and on what I mean by "transformative".

Part of my proposal is also the idea that talent and practice within the dynamics of the CRC have a transformative effect on the athlete. In the CRC, talent changes the nature of practice itself by constitutively shaping it, making it possible for practice to include certain activities and have results that would not be possible otherwise. Talented athletes not only practice in a different way, but their practice also has effects and lends results that are completely out of reach for amateurs. So, while amateurs might have a good grasp on what it is to practice and to get results *for them*, they are cut off from the practice-type and from the results of champions like Cecilia Zandalasini or Mikaela Shiffrin.

In this sense, thus, Olympians are like vampires, which is L.A. Paul's favored example to illustrate the notion of "transformative experience":

> Imagine that you have a one-time only chance to become a vampire. With one swift, painless bite, you'll be permanently transformed into an elegant and fabulous creature of the night. As a member of the Undead, your life will be completely different. […] how could you possibly make an informed choice? For, after all, *you cannot know what it is like to become a vampire until you become one, since the experience of becoming a vampire is transformative* (Paul 2015: 763; emphasis mine).

Becoming a sports champion involves a transformative experience resulting in one's apparently identical actions having different effects, unimaginable pre-transformation, and playing different roles in one's practical way of being.[7] Indeed, the actions are only 'apparently' identical: the transformation also makes it the case that the same set of drills executed by me and by Zandalasini play different roles for me and for her, and are expressions of two radically different forms of agency.

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[7] The cases of top athletes and vampires form a nice analogy, as Paul also points out, with Frank Jackson's thought experiment of the scientist Mary growing up in a black and white room (1982). Despite all of her theoretical knowledge about color science and neuroscience, she can only know what it's like to see colors once she goes out of the room and sees them with her own eyes. In other words (reminiscent of Nagel's *What Is It like to Be a Bat?*), no amount of 'third-person' knowledge can replace 'first-person' knowledge in the context of discovering what it's like to be something/someone we are not.