

# Extra Effort

*It only takes a fraction more.*



by Peter Vidmar

**H**OW OFTEN DO YOU HEAR a parent, coach, or teacher, say, “You better study twice as hard if you’re going to get success?”

The sentiment makes sense, but the math doesn’t. Most of the time, no matter how much we might want to, we simply can’t double any significant effort. It’s not possible in the case of a world-class athlete. In my sport, any gymnast hoping to make the Olympics must work out at least five hours a day. So if I’m going to double my training, I have to train 10 hours a day. Technically, that may be possible, but from a physical standpoint, it makes no sense. It would be exhausting to the point of being counterproductive.

## Just a Fraction Longer

So, the key to improving isn’t to work twice as hard, but just a fraction harder, or smarter, or longer. In the end, it’s the fraction that matters. Increase the quality of your effort bit by bit. Being the best is never really a matter of being twice as good as someone else. It’s usually measured by fractions.

In the Olympic arena, you will find example after example. Connie Carpenter-Phinney won the women’s road racing gold medal in cycling in the 1984 Olympics after 50 miles of racing—by one inch. Gary Hall Jr. won the 50-meter freestyle at the 2004 Athens Games by 1/100th of a second. In Track & Field, Justin Gatlin won the 100 meters in Athens to become the *Fastest Man in the World*. The fourth place finisher was just 4/100ths of a second behind!

No one wins by running twice as fast or jumping twice as far. They win by fractions—by portions of seconds undetected to the naked eye.

In *Sports Illustrated*, George Plimpton told a story about a phenomenal new rookie playing baseball for the New York Mets named Hayden “Sidd” Finch. Sidd was a pitcher who could throw a baseball 168 miles an hour—a third faster than anybody in

the major leagues; a third faster, in fact, than anyone had ever thrown a baseball in history.

Plimpton reported that Finch was proving to be unhittable in spring training. The Mets’ best hitters were going up to the plate and not swinging until the ball was already in the catcher’s mit.

“It’s possible that an absolute super-pitcher is coming into baseball,” Plimpton wrote. “So remarkable that the delicate balance between pitcher and hitter could be turned into disarray. He may well change the course of baseball history.”

Sidd Finch and his 168 mph fastball may, indeed, have changed the course of baseball history—except for one detail. He did not exist. Plimpton’s arti-



cle appeared in the April 1 edition of *Sports Illustrated*. He made the whole thing up. It was all an elaborate April Fool’s joke, which the magazine revealed in its following issue. There was no phenom/mystic named Sidd Finch. The Mets weren’t shoo-ins for the pennant and the World Series. The joke was on the readers.

The possibility was intriguing, however. What if a person really could perform a third above the rest? What would be the impact? Such a performer really could change the course of sport’s history.

But in the normal scheme of things, it just doesn’t work that way. Not only can’t we throw twice—or even a third—as fast as everyone else, or jump twice as high as others, we

can’t work twice as hard, either. But we can always work just a little bit harder, or a little bit smarter.

## Just 15 Minutes More

When I made the Olympic team along with Mitch Gaylord and Tim Daggett I knew I couldn’t outwork them by very much, if at all. We’d been teammates at UCLA for four years, and I knew how hard they trained. In college I had a more modest goal, and it was this: I’d be the last person out of the gym every day. That was hard to do when the rest of the team had that same goal! Workouts would get really long! But, every once in a while, I accomplished my goal. At the end of the day, I’d find myself in an empty gym by myself. I’d work an extra 15 or 20 minutes and feel like I was gaining ground.

I once calculated just how much of a difference 15 extra minutes a day could make. If you did that every day for a year, it would add up to 91 more hours of training. Think of the benefits if that training were applied to those skills that needed a little extra attention. For an athlete training three hours a day, 15 extra minutes a day over a year adds up to an extra month of training. Little extra efforts do make a big difference, when measured over time.

But where do you find the time to give that little extra effort, especially when your life is already so busy? Here’s a startling exercise I want you to do. Analyze one typical day by keeping a minute-by-minute log of your activities. List all of the little “time wasters” you do in each day (e.g., idle chatter, watching television, daydreaming, internet surfing). Calculate how much time you can gain by eliminating those obstacles to real effectiveness. Commit yourself *now* to meaningful lasting changes to these behaviors. Chances are, you will be amazed at the increase in your productivity and the time you have left over for the important stuff in life, like time with loved ones.

The extra attention you give to your client. The daily extra call you make to a customer. The hand written *thank you* note you send to someone. The unscheduled moments you take to play with your son or daughter. Little extra efforts *do* make a big difference. Because sometimes the small stuff really is the big stuff. PE

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**ACTION: Improve little by little.**