



WE MAY ALL DREAM OF ATTAINING GREATNESS, BUT ONLY A SELECT FEW ARE BORN WITH AN INNATE **DRIVING FORCE**. CHRISTIAN JARRETT EXPLORES THE WINNING FORMULA THAT HAS PROPELLED THE LIKES OF RICHARD BRANSON AND BILL GATES TO THE TOP

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DR CHRISTIAN JARRETT

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Roger Federer has won every Grand Slam tennis tournament on the circuit. He's earned more than £40 million in prize money so far and an Olympic gold medal. And yet, despite the distraction of marriage and twin daughters, he continues to play with as much graceful determination as ever.

According to traditional psychological theories, Federer's enduring motivation doesn't make sense. Tennis can't be meeting his basic biological needs for food, warmth and sex. As for the external rewards of cash and trophies: well, he's surely earned more money than he'll ever need, and he's won every title there is – in many cases, more than once. So what keeps him going?

The explanations for Federer's continuing drive and persistence are the same as for other highly successful individuals, such as Bill Gates, Ranulph Fiennes and Richard Branson.

Some of it boils down to personality. Psychologists talk about a trait known as achievement motivation, and related constructs like persistence and grit. The Federers, Gates, Fiennes and Bransons of this world have these traits in spades; they have boundless self-belief, long-term goals and an overwhelming will to succeed, to outdo themselves and their rivals.

To some extent, achievement motivation (measured by agreement with statements such as "Do you get restless and annoyed when you feel you're wasting time?") is something you're born with. Studies comparing identical twins (who share the same genes) with non-identical twins (who share half their genes) suggest that being achievement orientated has a heritability index of about 0.4 – so, about 40 per cent of the variation in this trait between people appears to be related to their genes.

Of course, that still leaves plenty of scope for situational factors to play a role. Much of this has to do with educational opportunities, role models and the freedom to choose one's own path. There's also evidence that an upper middle-class background is associated with more status anxiety, which could be conducive to the development of an achievement mindset. By contrast, the daily struggle of poverty may preclude the luxury of lofty ambitions, while the pampered existence of an affluent upbringing could mollify a zest for success.

As well as being focused on achievement, driven characters such as Federer and Fiennes also have an abundance of intrinsic





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The limits of extrinsic motivation have also been demonstrated in business and creative contexts. The behavioural economist Dan Ariely at Duke University, author of *Predictably Irrational*, travelled to India with his colleagues where the low wages made it possible for his team to investigate the motivational impact of large bonuses. They tested participants on various challenges involving co-ordination, memory and concentration and offered them the prospect of either small, medium or massive

(nearly five months' pay) rewards for their success. The key finding: the participants competing to earn a massive bonus performed less well than the others.

In another study, Teresa Amabile at Harvard University and her colleagues recruited professional artists in the USA and had them submit some of their works they'd produced for a fee and others that they'd completed in their own time. All the works were then rated for technical ability and creativity by a panel of experts. The striking finding here was that the works produced purely for pleasure were consistently rated as more creative and just as technically proficient as the commissioned works. For this reason, Google and other companies are recognising the importance of intrinsic motivation by scheduling free creativity time for their staff to work on whatever projects they choose.

Dedication is essential to success and books like *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell have popularised the research of Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson, who claims that true expertise comes from the dedication of, what he calls, deliberate practice. Lots of it – 10,000 hours' worth on average. "You don't learn to walk by following rules," Richard Branson has said. "You learn by doing, and by falling over."

This is not the kind of practice where you just put in the time. It's about always pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone, ruthlessly targeting those areas of your game or skill that are weakest. As David Shenk writes in *The Genius in All of Us*, this approach is like a "pathological restlessness, a passion to aim just beyond your capability so that you actually long for daily disappointment and failure". A related psychological concept is called flow – the almost spiritual, lost-in-the-moment, self-fulfilling pleasure that comes from engaging in tasks that take you to the limit of your abilities.

motivation. They don't climb mountains or enter another championship for the external reward of more cash or status – even if that's what got them started in the first place. They find pleasure in the challenge. The path to mastery is their drug.

"I have plenty of money like you said ... now it's just important to enjoy the tour as much as I can and chase history, chase the records of the game and, you know, let the fans enjoy this ride with me," Federer said to CNN.

In fact, external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation, as illustrated in a classic 1960s study by the University of Rochester's psychology professor Edward Deci. He tasked his participants with solving puzzles as fast as they could. One group he rewarded with cash for each correct puzzle; the other group didn't receive rewards. On a subsequent testing day, Deci told the group paid previously that there'd be no more rewards. He then left the room for eight minutes, ostensibly to collate the participants' completion times but, in fact, he was observing the participants. Here's the key finding – the group that never received cash rewards tended to while away the time playing with the puzzles. That's no surprise: after all, the puzzles were pretty fun. By contrast, the group that had been paid for playing the puzzles tended to avoid them – the earlier cash rewards had somehow killed the inherent pleasure found in playing the puzzles.

Ranulph Fiennes once completed seven marathons in seven days on seven continents for the Land Rover 7x7x7 Challenge, just months after major heart surgery. These kinds of projects require diligent planning and they provide the perfect gruelling context for the demands and fulfilment of deliberate practice and flow. "It is a fact," Fiennes has admitted about his career, "that the origins of it all was to make an income. But then I began to like it very much. I was fascinated by each problem and the knowledge that human beings hadn't solved this particular problem before." The philosophy of deliberate practice was also captured by the middle distance runner Sebastian Coe (the winner of four Olympic medals, including two golds) as quoted in Dan Pink's *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. "Throughout my athletics career, the overall goal was always to be a better athlete than I was at that moment. Whether next week, next month or next year. The improvement was the goal. The medal was simply the ultimate reward for achieving that goal."

A need for achievement and the pleasure driven people derive from mastering their art explains a lot, but it's not always the whole story. Many driven individuals also benefit from a keen rivalry. It's unlikely Bill Gates and Steve Jobs would have achieved such successes if they weren't always seeking to outdo the other. Look how the emergence of Rafael Nadal spurred Federer onto still greater heights. The psychology of rivalry is little investigated so far. A pioneer in this respect is Gavin Kilduff at New York University Stern School of Business. In as yet unpublished research with university basketball teams, he's tried to identify the factors that contribute to the formation of rivalries, including geographic proximity, similarity of status and ability, and a history of close contests. In other work, Kilduff has examined race data from a running club and found evidence that people run faster when a rival is in the starting line-up.

The final pieces in the driven jigsaw are to do with higher purpose and existential angst. When Fiennes ran those marathons, he was raising money for the British Heart Foundation. When comedian Eddie Izzard completed the mind-boggling feat of running 43 marathons in 51 days, he

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was raising money for Sport Relief. Bill Gates, whose business success made him the world's wealthiest person, left Microsoft and has established numerous philanthropic endeavours. Seb Coe has spearheaded the preparation of the London Olympics. All these examples show highly driven people, who've arguably reached the peak in their chosen fields, finding a higher purpose and channelling their energies into more altruistic work.

In psychology there's something known as Terror Management Theory, which states that thoughts of our own mortality provoke us to cling strongly to sources of meaning in our lives. It's been shown that this can manifest in trivial ways – for example, a morbid reminder can make a voter more partisan or a football fan even more passionate. For driven people, it's arguably this same existential angst that can inspire them to seek comfort in a higher purpose and a kind of immortality through their achievements. These individuals think about their legacy and how they'll be remembered.

Consider the actor James Dean. Popular mythology suggests that Dean resembled the on-screen, rudderless character he played in *Rebel Without a Cause*. In fact, Dean was hugely ambitious and had numerous plans in place at the time of his death at the age of 24, including starring in two films, creating a production unit and competing in car races. "I think there is only one form of greatness for man," Dean said. "If a man can bridge the gap between life and death. I mean if he can live on after he has died, then maybe he was a great man. To me the only success, the only greatness, is immortality."

Similar emotions and motivations are apparent in the recent words of the Jamaican sprinter and double world-record holder Usain Bolt. Speaking to *The Times* he said he wanted people to refer to him as the greatest track and field athlete of all time. "I want to be a legend," he said.

The driving force for each highly successful person is different, but what they share is a hardwiring that pushes them further and harder. Goals become markers, not end points. Winning, in whatever way they perceive it, is everything. ☐

IPAD EXTRA
Are you the next Bill Gates? Find out how driven you are in our quiz, exclusive to the *Onelife* magazine iPad app