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Marek Magnus

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Percussive Passion

Marek Magnus

The chilling oasis masked the truth of the boiling heat outside. This way the orchestra's stringed instruments would maintain their integrity as heat could make the wood expand. The drumline assembled before the staggeringly large mirror to critique their own playing. Excitement permeated within everyone as they learned the new music for the upcoming marching band season. This, of course, resulted in a cacophony of staggering and frantic notes forming a menagerie of rhythms that all coiled around each other like ropes; only for the ropes to be pulled tighter and tighter to create an amalgamation of what the music once was. The staff members watched them as if they were children all running amuck on a playground. It was in that moment...that a remarkable talent was discovered, and its recognition was the match head striking the matchbox.

Amidst the chaotic playing, I was already past most of the others in terms of learning the music and had begun to tinker with bits and pieces. I was much more prone to adding various challenging flairs to the music as jokes since I was one of the more advanced drummers along the drumline. The most notable trick was that I was able to create a sort of twitch with my fingers so that the drumstick would be able to strike the head at an unnatural pace to which nobody else could match, not even the staff members. Upon discovering my talent, the staff members coaxed me into thinking about a drumming competition that was coming up in a few months. It would be a test to see who would be able to play the fastest which I would be a prime candidate for.

The desert of information that was the internet served no help to such an esoteric and niche subject. The solitude of the office served as a medium through which extensive research was to take place. Experiments were set in motion to sail through the waters of discovery as the brainstorming would ultimately decide the rocky course. Articles and research flashed on the phone screen regarding meditation, physics, anatomy, physiology, and videos of previous competitors of the competition. All proved useful in the seemingly eclectic subject of this talent and how it could be controlled and wielded. Hours upon hours of meditation of slow alternating drum strokes stimulated muscle memory. Laws of physics would serve as hints towards how the stick should be manipulated to maximize speed. Anatomy diagrams teaching physiology of the arms and fingers separates this talent from being magic to how it is possible. The match is then tossed into sticks and starts to grow.

Nowhere will the internet relieve my questions regarding how I could control my talent in a way that would make it functional. I could only play fast with my dominant hand, but I needed to alternate between both hands for the competition. Every attempt resulted in one hand being slightly faster or slower causing them to overlap. How could I perfectly balance the slight time margins between something occurring twenty times a second? No straight answer would relieve this, but using various topics could help find some answer. Eventually, I was able to control it for five seconds before

giving out...I needed to play it for a whole minute. Each few seconds would cause for celebration as it was just a step closer, no matter how small. Nobody else would understand my efforts, but this passion would fuel me to keep going. I felt special, unique even, to be able to have such a talent that made me stand out from thousands of other drummers, millions of people even. The sheer thought invigorated my passion to burn brighter and harder to practice and study for hours. Slow motion videos of me playing, where I would study my hand movements, taught me how to balance a push-pull system in which I could control the rebound of the stick and juggle it between my wrist and fingers, within twentieths of seconds, to sustain for longer time periods. Deep breathing would keep a focused mind as well as delivering oxygen to my forearm muscles to prevent them from tiring from burning out. This is not normal...was I going insane...or was this what true unwavering passion felt like?

The competition was held in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis. One of the largest percussion conventions in the world where thousands would gather over its few days of its annual existence to celebrate all that is percussive. Thousands that could also compete in the competition. The hall the competition was held in was crowded with a plethora of percussion instruments. Percussion celebrities gathered to pass on their knowledge as well as flaunt their merchandise. A percussionist's paradise, drums as far as the eye could see. If the drumline was a cacophony, then this was an atomic bomb of sound that obligated the workers to hand out free earplugs before entering. The booth of the competition consisted of a drum pad with a red rim and a surface that had the rebound equivalence of a pillow, in other words...none. A clever device was hooked onto the drum pad that would detect vibrations from each stroke that would then be counted to a total that would stop tracking after sixty seconds.

An entire marching band's expectations and hopes rested on two shoulders that made their way towards the booth that the competition was held. My infectious passion could not be masked as a smirk made its mark on my face as I knew that three months of hard work would come to its fruition. I was with the rest of the drumline as well as the staff members that had inspired me to begin with. They were all supporting me, and I could not let them down. The bell rang, and I fire off strokes. The drum pad was noticeably harder to play on which required more force, force that I did not have the energy to spend. I trained my stamina with having more rebound to work with to drive my strokes; however, the lack of rebound caused me to have to put in more energy to keep the stick moving the rate I needed it to go at. Over time, I was winded and started to give out, and, on top of that, I had forgotten my breathing exercises which suffocated any chance I had. Still, I had gotten a score of 903 which was about fifteen strokes per second. Of course, my "fans" cheered as I had gotten second place, under a score of 1012. Defeat was the only feeling I felt. Luckily, I could try as many times as I wanted. I tried to enjoy my time at the other parts of the convention, but I was still fixated on the competition. After all, I had worked so hard, I would not settle for second place. Later, I tried again with some more foresight as what to expect, and I scored 1056, giving me first place. However, the competition did not end until tomorrow, so I would have to come back to defend my title.

The bus ride back to the high school was heavy. Exclamations swam through the air with all the excitement that was experienced. The same jocular group had expectations. Expectations that were subconscious. Subconsciously thinking that there was a winner on that bus. Dozens of implicit stares felt heavy. The night sky felt suffocating. The seats felt cramped. These frantic observations were the only way to grapple to reality as fear intruded on this moment. Words of reassurance, praise, and encouragement rang hollow as they triggered more expectations. Second place would bring sympathy, the same sympathizers would be disappointed at the empty hands of second place. Returning to that office, the passion was bewildered. Fear became a gust of wind that would either snuff out the flames or fuel it to grow...grow into a forest fire.

Keep training...training until I cannot feel my arms. I was so close and not about to lose it all. Everyone accepted that I would win which would certainly cause disappointment if I did not produce results. They never explicitly said that they would be disappointed, but they spoke so highly of me...I could not risk the disappointment. Hanging my head in shame as their patronization would weigh heavy on my ears, this was not the future I could accept. I arrived at the booth once more with conviction. I still held first with the second-place participant's score of 1024 still there...1024!? He must have come back to keep fighting...the only response to which would be to fight back. Attempt after attempt, going so fast that he would scare me each attempt since the counter would be rising so fast that he could have surpassed me with just a few more seconds of playing. 1028, 1030, 1032...the margin shrank as it constricted my brain into more doubt. What if he surpassed me? What if I did not measure up? How could I face everyone? I lost control over my passion and let the whirlwind of fire take over me. The last round of attempts was called up and with it I rose. Each step left a smoldering footprint as I emanated determination. He went first, this attempt would decide whether I could relax or not. He began, but his technique was different, much faster than before. I had to ease up if I were to perform well. It did not matter what he would get since I knew I would top it, I had to. It was my turn, my last chance, to show what I was capable of. I started at twenty strokes a second for the first half then began to decline, and that was when one of the staff members yelled over the cheering for me to breathe. Of course, I had forgotten, through my intense focus, to breathe. One sharp, revitalizing breath flushed all the memories of the hard work that led to that moment right into my eyes. My arms became extremely feverish to the point of feeling frigid, and my blood felt like pebbles screaming as they coursed within me as I made my last stand.

Passion should not be founded on expectations; it should be founded on curiosity and wonder. The intrigue to pursue life with a force that is ebullient and free is what pure, innate passion should come from. I lost sight of why I had started in the first place and became fearful of what others thought of me. At the same time, that fear drove me to perform harder. Is it right to let me get driven by that fear? I got the result I wanted, but the means were wrought with dread. The passionate majority of my journey was what was enjoyable, the fear simply kicked in and gave some urgency...overwhelming urgency. Looking back a year later, I can say that the experience taught me how to stir passion within me. I also am now wary of my fear of expectations others can have on me. Could I manipulate this to my favor? I questioned whether that was healthy as I held up the champion belt and smiled for my picture. On the surface I was a winner, but had I lost on the inside? Perhaps this was somehow a form of motivation, the beat my heart marches to as it approaches passion. Tempo fluctuations dependent on the weight of expectations from others...or even myself. In that moment, I smile, not for the camera but, for Dad's smile. My staff members' smiles. My peers' smiles. My family's smiles. Most importantly, my own smile later that night when I could reflect on that day. Achievement is only as fruitful as the tree it grew from. All it takes is proper care in the right soil. Then, that work is taken and set ablaze with passion to be watched as the flames touch the sky, burning brighter than a supernova. Everyone else may only see the incendiary result, but I know of the effort it took to grow that tree. To that, I smile the most, as I unflinchingly embrace my work.