

RANGE

WHY GENERALISTS TRIUMPH
IN A SPECIALIZED WORLD



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The Sports Gene

R A N G E

Why Generalists Triumph
in a Specialized World

David Epstein

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For Elizabeth,
this one and any other one

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And he refused to specialize in anything, preferring to keep an eye on *the overall estate* rather than any of its parts. . . . And Nikolay's management produced the most brilliant results.

—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

No tool is omnicompetent. There is no such thing as a master-key that will unlock *all* doors.

—Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*

INTRODUCTION

Roger vs. Tiger

LET'S START WITH a couple of stories from the world of sports. This first one, you probably know.

The boy's father could tell something was different. At six months old, the boy could balance on his father's palm as he walked through their home. At seven months, his father gave him a putter to fool around with, and the boy dragged it everywhere he went in his little circular baby walker. At ten months, he climbed down from his high chair, trundled over to a golf club that had been cut down to size for him, and imitated the swing he'd been watching in the garage. Because the father couldn't yet talk with his son, he drew pictures to show the boy how to place his hands on the club. "It is very difficult to communicate how to putt when the child is too young to talk," he would later note.

At two—an age when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention list physical developmental milestones like "kicks a ball" and "stands on tiptoe"—he went on national television and used a club tall enough to reach his shoulder to drive a ball past an admiring Bob Hope. That same year, he entered his first tournament, and won the ten-and-under division.

There was no time to waste. By three, the boy was learning how to play out of a "sand trap," and his father was mapping out his destiny. He knew his son had been chosen for this, and that it was his duty to guide him. Think about it: if you felt that certain about the path ahead, maybe you too would start prepping your three-year-old to handle the inevitable and insatiable media that would come. He quizzed the boy, playing reporter, teaching him how to give curt answers, never to offer more than precisely

what was asked. That year, the boy shot 48, eleven over par, for nine holes at a course in California.

When the boy was four, his father could drop him off at a golf course at nine in the morning and pick him up eight hours later, sometimes with the money he'd won from those foolish enough to doubt.

At eight, the son beat his father for the first time. The father didn't mind, because he was convinced that his boy was singularly talented, and that he was uniquely equipped to help him. He had been an outstanding athlete himself, and against enormous odds. He played baseball in college when he was the only black player in the entire conference. He understood people, and discipline; a sociology major, he served in Vietnam as a member of the Army's elite Green Berets, and later taught psychological warfare to future officers. He knew he hadn't done his best with three kids from a previous marriage, but now he could see that he'd been given a second chance to do the right thing with number four. And it was all going according to plan.

The boy was already famous by the time he reached Stanford, and soon his father opened up about his importance. His son would have a larger impact than Nelson Mandela, than Gandhi, than Buddha, he insisted. "He has a larger forum than any of them," he said. "He's the bridge between the East and the West. There is no limit because he has the guidance. I don't know yet exactly what form this will take. But he is the Chosen One."



This second story, you also probably know. You might not recognize it at first.

His mom was a coach, but she never coached him. He would kick a ball around with her when he learned to walk. As a boy, he played squash with his father on Sundays. He dabbled in skiing, wrestling, swimming, and skateboarding. He played basketball, handball, tennis, table tennis, badminton over his neighbor's fence, and soccer at school. He would later give credit to the wide range of sports he played for helping him develop his athleticism and hand-eye coordination.

He found that the sport really didn't matter much, so long as it included a ball. "I was always very much more interested if a ball was involved," he would remember. He was a kid who loved to play. His parents had no