



Episode 4: Sports and Self-Esteem

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Podcast:

SUSAN: I'm Susan Cain and this is Quiet: the Power of Introverts.

Sochi, Russia, 2014. The winter Olympics are in full swing, and the Iceberg Skating Palace is crowded with fans lucky enough to get tickets for the finals of the ice dancing competition. It's a sport long dominated by the Russians, and the host country's fans are hungry for a gold medal. But two American skaters have other plans.

A handsome blond man and his beautiful brunette partner execute a jaw-dropping routine, full of excitingly acrobatic lifts and step sequences punctuated by moments of slow, quiet grace. Unknown to most people in the stands or watching on TV, this blend of showmanship and subtlety describes both the routine

itself, but also the temperaments of the couple performing it. As it draws to a perfect close, the crowd, the judges, and the announcers know they've just witnessed something extraordinary.

OLYMPICS ANNOUNCER: Oh my goodness me! They've been together for 17 years. This is the moment they've been waiting for and look at that score! Unbelievable. They've taken this free dance to a completely other level! Oh wow!

SUSAN: And yet, when Meryl Davis and Charlie White first began ice dancing together at the age of 10, they did not seem like an ideal match. As this ABC News profile during the Olympics noted, the young Meryl, a strong introvert, literally could not look her partner in the eye.

ANNOUNCER: You see how close they are now, but when Meryl and Charlie first started skating together Meryl was too shy to even look at him so their coaches had to put a sticker on Charlie's forehead so Meryl would have a place to look and not feel awkward.

SUSAN: But Charlie was not offended.

CHARLIE: I think just the idea of when you're a little boy and you're supposed to not just hold hands with a girl but be in a position where you're directly face to face it's kind of just embarrassing and it took us a while to feel comfortable enough to break through that barrier and sort of get on the same page.

SUSAN: Of course, years of working together allowed Meryl and Charlie not just to get comfortable with each other, also but to appreciate how their different temperaments played out on the ice. This is Meryl today.

MERYL: You know, the way we express ourselves artistically, I think Charlie has always been the more explosive skater. He's always been bigger in movement type and mine has always been smaller.

SUSAN: The partners now embrace how their very different personalities infuse an artistic duality into their routines.

MERYL: That's really been one of the most beautiful thing about our partnership and about skating. We love what we do, and we understand and respect each other

to the point where we can enjoy the day to day, which is definitely a gift when you spend so much time doing one thing.

SUSAN: But why would an introvert like Meryl take up something so public and high profile as Olympic ice dancing in the first place? In fact, why would any shy or quiet child get into sports, which by its very nature involves being judged and often failing publicly? But many quiet kids DO immerse themselves in sports, and lots go on to excel professionally.

I happened to be an avid figure skater as a child. I was never a threat to win an Olympic medal, but that's not why it did it. I just thought that it was beautiful, and I loved working hard to make something beautiful like that happen. When my mother couldn't drive me to the rink, I used to spend hours practicing my spins and jumps on the linoleum kitchen floor. I was really persistent and dedicated, and all those hours of work paid off—not so much in medals or applause as in self-esteem.

And that's our topic today: how all kids—but especially quiet ones—can use athletics to achieve mastery... a mastery that builds confidence and pays off for a lifetime. We're going to focus on sports, but the ideas in today's podcast apply equally to chess, science, music, or any other pursuit that kids love and devote themselves to. It doesn't have to be athletics.

JAKE: This is sort of a trophy case that my brother and I share of chess and athletic trophies. There are probably 50 here I'd say. We competed in a lot of different things when we were younger.

SUSAN: That's 20 year-old Jake Millman. The trophy case in his New York City home displays awards for soccer and tennis, and even basketball. There's also a lot of chess trophies from when he toured the country playing tournaments as a young boy. Jake describes himself as an "extreme introvert." We got to know each other after he read my book, [Quiet](#), and then started a coalition for fellow introverts at his high school. Now a student at Princeton, Jake continues to advocate for quiet students. And when he looks at that trophy case, he doesn't see the story of things he achieved *in spite* of his temperament. He sees proof that introversion gave him a competitive advantage.

JAKE: Discipline is obviously very important in the area

of academics but also in sports, so the fact that I'm ok with just being alone and doing things over and over again to get it right, and not getting bored or frustrated definitely has helped in athletics as well.

SUSAN: There is a term for this kind of focus. It's called deliberate practice and introverts tend to be really, really good at it.

JEFF: When you're taking part in deliberate practice, you are practicing just beyond your comfort level.

SUSAN: That's Jeff Bryan, a former All-American lacrosse player who worked to enhance his game at West Point's Center for Enhanced Performance. The center trains West Point cadets in performance psychology to help them reach their full potential.

JEFF: So say you're a lacrosse player and it's easy to just throw a pass right handed. Well if you switch to your left hand and you're not quite as good, and you keep working on that, those left handed passes, and you work on them from different angles and it's tougher for you and maybe you miss 20 or 30 percent of the time. You don't get it right in your target. That's deliberate practice. But you're stretching outside your comfort zone. You're right on the edge of what you're capable of doing, and going beyond it, and failing a little bit. But by failing and making those incremental changes you're actually getting better and improving.

MERYL: I think most successful skaters tend towards perfectionism.

SUSAN: That's Olympic ice dancer Meryl Davis again. For her, deliberate practice doesn't just take place on skates:

MERYL: I've always enjoyed sitting at home and reviewing things on video by myself. And just taking note. And then approaching the next day with those notes I was able to make. We would try to figure out what it was that we felt like we could do better. Really pushing THAT idea, to the point where we were completely pleased. I honestly don't think that really happened until Olympic year.

SUSAN: The trick here for parents and their quiet kids is finding the deliberate practice sweet spot. It's the kind of athletic challenge that's just hard enough to spur them

on, without being so hard that they get discouraged and give up.

Of course, finding that sweet spot requires two other crucial things—a sport the child actually enjoys, and a coach who understands her.

We'll talk about both those issues in a moment. But first this word from our sponsors.

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Podcast:

SUSAN: I'm Susan Cain, and today we're talking about introverts and sports. We've seen how many quiet kids excel at deliberate practice. But no amount of hard work will help a child embrace a sport if he just doesn't like it in the first place. Some introverts, like Jake Millman with his soccer, excel at team sports. But for many, individual sports are more appealing.

SUSAN: Master Philip Benson is teaching Tae Kwon Do to a group of young students at his dojo in upstate New York. Although he's a black belt today, Benson didn't seem destined as a child to master a martial art.

MASTER BENSON: I was really sick growing up. Lot of health issues. And I was really really quiet. Talk about an introvert. I was, you know, I had trouble there.

SUSAN: Master Benson tried other sports when he was young, but it wasn't until he discovered Tae Kwon Do that things really clicked.

MASTER BENSON: It was the right environment for me. It was quiet. It was an individual sport that I could chart my progress with and plan. I had a culture to learn about. I had an experience. I had hierarchies, things that I didn't have to second guess. And it gave me that confidence of a system to kind of fall into easily.

SUSAN: For Master Benson, having clear benchmarks to hit and a culture to learn motivated him to make progress on his own. But plenty of introverts enjoy team sports, too, even if that means learning to assert themselves in a group. Jeff Bryan remembers one talented introvert whose quiet style stood in the way of performing his best.

JEFF: We had a goalie who was definitely a quieter kid. And he was doing an amazing job of stopping the ball. But his job as a goalie is not just to stop the ball, but also to direct his defense. And he wasn't doing a good job of being loud and really taking command vocally on the

field. And we needed him to do that. And I thought about the "free trait theory". People being able to step outside their comfort zones. They're not just one type of person all the time. If they have something that they really want to do well, they can step outside their comfort zone to do that. And so I just talked to him. I would warm him up every day for practice and for games and I just said, "Hey listen. We need you to talk more. The defense needs you out there. The team needs you out there to be more vocal. So it's just something you have to do for us to win games." And slowly but surely he did that and the team just did great. And he ended up being a Second Team All-Areas selection and he was voted team captain the following season by his teammates.

SUSAN: Jeff Bryan's story is not only about introverts working through uncomfortable situations, but also how a sensitive coach can make all the difference. Master Philip Bensen, mindful of his own introverted childhood, is enormously patient when he has a quiet child in his class.

MASTER BENSON: I see a child who's terrified to participate, but they're standing somewhere already that's fine. They can stay there. And just because they're not with the group, just because they're not actually performing the actions that the group is doing, doesn't mean that they're not participating. They can be engaged mentally, and there are plenty of clues to reinforce that. Eye contact, emotive responses: if we're laughing they're laughing, if we're serious they're serious. And from the distance they start to participate. And I like to buzz them when they're over there. So it's not like you put them over in a corner and you ignore them. You address the class, and you throw a comment back over that way. And you always give them the option through that to participate.

SUSAN: This patience can pay off, says Master Benson. The student can get over his or her initial reticence. But he says it also depends on whether parents also have the patience to let their kids get comfortable.

MASTER BENSON: I see parents on both ends of the spectrum. I see really permissive parents, and really dismissive parents. So when you get a dismissive parent, they might say, "I don't know what's wrong with Johnny. Johnny came in here. He said he wanted to do it, now he's here he's backing off. What the ?!" And this is right in front of the child. So any security he had from

leadership is now out the window. Not to mention the fact that he also might feel a little empowered that he control the situation. On the other hand, you get the permissive parent which says, "Oh you know, Johnny doesn't want to be here, so we're just going to take off." And both of those need patience because you need to stick to the course, whatever it might be. And it doesn't mean you have to go against the child's nature to do it. It just takes time.

SUSAN: It *does* take time. For ice dancing champions Meryl Davis and Charlie White, it took more than a decade for their hard work and patience to pay off. And the payoff wasn't just when they won gold in Sochi...

SUSAN: ... the real payoff, says Meryl, is how satisfying, how FUN, the work is.

MERYL: Our temperaments are incredibly different now from the way they were at the start. I'm much more outgoing now than I was when I was younger. I'm more comfortable. The way we are now and have been for several years now, we're very comfortable with each other after 19 years, and even when we have a tough day or an easier day, we are always able to make light of it and have a great time.

SUSAN: And after all most of us, introverts OR extroverts, will never win Olympic gold. But we can have a great time pursuing sports we love.

JAY: My name is Jay and I'm in second grade.

SUSAN: Jay is a quiet guy, and his mom readily admits he's not a sports superstar, and probably never will be. But if you want to hear what self-esteem sounds like, just listen to him.

JAY: Basketball, I thought I was really good at shooting and I had a really good strategy, and baseball, I liked hitting too. And I liked kicking things and my brother let me kick a ball, a soccer ball and then I kicked it in the goal and he was like, "You wanna play soccer with me?" and I was like "yeah" and then I loved it!

SUSAN: Now it's that time in the show where I give you a few concrete tips for parenting or coaching quiet athletes.

But first, if you're the parent of a quiet child ages 3 to 9

I'm so excited to tell you about a new online course we've created that I really think can change the way you parent your child. The course includes all kinds of interactive features like a tool to help you decide when and when not to press your child out of her comfort zone. And actual scripts for how to advocate for your child with people who say he's too shy. You'll also have the chance to interact with other parents of quiet kids. To check out the course just visit learn.quietrev.com.

Ok, now for today's tips.

Number one: if your child plays team sports, make sure they have time to practice alone or one-on-one with a coach—always focusing on skills just outside their reach. This technique is called deliberate practice.

Psychologists believe that it's the key to developing mastery and excellence—and it just so happens that introverts are naturally good at it.

Number two: Don't be afraid to talk about your child's temperament with his coach. If your child responds better to gentle encouragement than to yelling, it's ok to find a coach who gets that and who will make the small adjustments your child might need to thrive. Here's ice dancer Charlie White.

CHARLIE: A lot of introverts feel like it's their responsibility to deal with their own problems and to come up with own solutions because that's being self-sufficient, and while that's true, you're paying a professional who has been in the sport and has the experience and will help you with that.

SUSAN: And number three, remember that although we've been talking today about sports, there are many other pursuits where quiet kids can dive into deliberate practice and gain mastery—from robotics to the performing arts. In fact, it turns out some of the world's best performers are introverts who've overcome their initial fears of the spotlight. And in a future episode, we'll hear actor Molly Ringwald talking about her own experience with this process. The key is to expose quiet kids to lots of different activities, and let them gravitate to the ones they like best.

That's it for our show today.

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Quiet: The Power of Introverts was produced by Kerrie Hillman in partnership with Andy Bowers and Laura Mayer of Panoply. The episode was edited by Cristy Meiners, and mixed by Jason Gambrell. Our music was composed by Alexis Cuadrado. Special thanks to everyone at Quiet Revolution.

Next week on Quiet: social media and introverted kids—what pitfalls to watch out for but also how your kid can use social media to build their confidence.

Thanks for listening. I'm Susan Cain.