

Checkmate to Deliberate Practice

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The currently dominant theory of expertise acquisition argues that superior performance is an increasing monotonic function of deliberate practice – the more goal-oriented practice, the higher the level of skill – and denies the role of talent in most domains (1, 2). Chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen (Norway), who has just qualified to challenge world champion Viswanathan Anand (India), throws considerable doubt on this theory. In the last rating list published by the World Chess Federation (3), 22-year old Carlsen is ranked first with 2,872 points, the highest rating ever. There is a 63-point difference between him and the second player, grandmaster Levon Aronian (Armenia). This difference is the same as that between the 2nd and the 14th player in the list. In the world championship qualification tournament held in London, Carlsen was the youngest participant (mean age of competitors = 35.1 years). We can assume that, at this level, all players practice with extreme dedication and with the best training methods. We can also assume that age did not negatively affect Carlsen's competitors, as all were younger than 45 years. (By comparison, World champion Anand is 43 years old.) If expertise was solely a monotonic function of practice, then it follows that Carlsen, who started playing chess seriously at the relatively old age of eight, should be much weaker than his older opponents, who had time to clock in substantially more deliberate practice (on average, at least 13 years more). The fact that Carlsen qualified for the world championship and so clearly dominates the chess world refutes this hypothesis, central to the theory of deliberate practice.

References

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