

The following is an excerpt from Tom Roth's book, Strength Finder 2.0

At its fundamentally flawed core, the aim of almost any learning program is to help us become who we are *not*. If you don't have natural talent with numbers, you're still forced to spend time in that area to attain a degree. If you're not very empathic, you get sent to a course designed to infuse empathy into your personality. From the cradle to the cubicle, we devote more time to our shortcomings than to our strengths.

This is quite apparent in the way we create icons out of people who struggle to overcome a lack of natural talent. Consider the true story of Rudy Ruettiger, the 21-year-old groundskeeper at Notre Dame's stadium, who was the protagonist of the 1993 movie *Rudy*. At just 5'6" and 165 pounds, this young man clearly didn't possess the physical ability to play big-time college football, but he had ample "heart."

Rudy worked tirelessly to gain admission to Notre Dame so he could play football there. Eventually, after being rejected three times, he was accepted at Notre Dame and soon thereafter earned a spot on the football team's practice squad.

For two years, Rudy took a beating in daily practices, but he was never allowed to join his team on the sidelines. Then, after trying as hard as he could for two seasons, Rudy was finally invited to suit up for the final game of his senior year. In the last moments of the game, with a Notre Dame victory safely in hand, Rudy's teammates lobbied their coach to put him in the game. IN the final seconds, the coach sent Rudy in for a single play – and he tackled the opposing team's quarterback.

It was a dramatic moment and, of course, Rudy became an instant hero. Fans chanted his name and carried him off the field. Ruettiger was later invited to the White House, where he met President Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, and football legend Joe Montana. While Rudy's perseverance is admirable, in the end, he played a few seconds of college football and made a single tackle ... after thousands of hours of practicing.

The inspirational nature of this story actually masks a significant problem: Overcoming deficits is an essential part of the fabric of our culture. Out books, movies, and folklore are filled with stories of the underdog who beats one-in-a-million odds. And this leads us to celebrate those who triumph over their lack of natural ability even more than we recognize those who capitalize on their innate talents. As a result, millions of people see these heroes as being the epitome of the American Dream and set their sights on conquering major challenges. Unfortunately, this is taking the path of *most* resistance.

A Misguided Maxim?

“You can be anything you want to be, if you just try hard enough.”

Like most people, I embraced this maxim at a young age. Along with thousands of other kids, I spent a good chunk of my childhood trying to be the next Michael Jordan. Every day, I practiced shooting hoops for three or four hours. I went to basketball camps each summer and tried in every way possible to be a great player. No matter how hard I had worked at it, though, becoming an NBA star simply wasn't in the cards for me. After giving 100% of my effort for more than five years, I couldn't even make the junior varsity team.

... What's even more disheartening is the way our fixation on deficits affects young people in the home and classroom. In every culture we have studied, the overwhelming majority of parents (77% in the United States) think that a student's *lowest* grades deserve the *most* time and attention. Parents and teachers regard excellence with apathy instead of investing more time in the areas where a child has the most potential for greatness.

The reality is that a person who has always struggled with numbers is unlikely to be a great accountant or statistician. And the person without much natural empathy will never be able to comfort an agitated customer in the warm and sincere way that the great empathizers can. Even the legendary Michael Jordan, who embodied the power of raw talent on a basketball court, could not become, well, the “Michael Jordan” of golf or baseball, no matter how hard he tried.

This might sound like a heretical point of view, especially for those of us who grew up believing the essential American myth that we could be come anything we wanted. Yet it's clear from Gallup's research that each person has greater potential for success in specific areas, and the key to human development is building on who you already are.

...When we're able to put most of our energy into developing our natural talents, extraordinary room for growth exists. So, a revision to the “You-can-be-anything-you-want-to-be” maxim might be more accurate:

*You **cannot** be anything you want to be – but you **can** be a lot more of who you already are.*