

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Pursuit of Excellence

To obtain excellence, one must grasp commitment, responsibility, grit and more.

We love a big splash! Take ESPN’s top 10 plays for example. Walk-off home runs, grand slams, thunderous dunks, spectacular shots on goals and feats that elicit amazement get the spotlight. Glamorizing these events implies excellence is a flashy but fleeting outcome. Nothing could be further from the truth — excellence is a sweat-inducing process demanding commitment to doing challenging work without fanfare.

Those who seek excellence know it is not a destination to attain, but an arduous path to be experienced — a journey that shapes us through pressure, friction and difficulty. With each new challenge, learning is enhanced, and missteps become informative. Excellence is not a gift bestowed on the chosen few but is within the reach of anyone willing to take up the pursuit.

In his work, “The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays,” Wendell Berry describes most aptly that excellence has a price that must be paid along the way.

“[All the ancient wisdom] tells us that work is necessary to us, as much a part of our condition as mortality; that good work is our salvation and our joy; that shoddy or dishonest or self-serving work is our curse and our doom. We have tried to escape the sweat and sorrow promised in Genesis — only to find that, in order

to do so, we must forswear love and excellence, health and joy.”

Sustained excellence, viewed in the context of Berry’s lens, is born of a commitment to purpose, responsibility, sacrifice, adaptation and grit. In the realm of sports, the case can be made that the most dominant team in the past century or so has been the national rugby team of New Zealand — the All Blacks. In his study of the foundations and habits that have contributed to their legacy, James Kerr points to an equation worthy of consideration:

Performance = Capability + Behavior

Sustainable high-level performance occurs when high capability is coupled with disciplined long-term habits. Talent is not enough to assure desired outcomes. In fact, a less talented but more disciplined team has a better chance of success.

The formula must also be set upon a foundation of high personal and professional character. Furthermore, team members must have a deep awareness of their purpose and a clear understanding of who or what they play for.


Kerr discovered the excellence embodied in the All Blacks organization was not dependent on massive increases of improvement in a particular skill or attitude

but rather by small, incremental improvements across a number of key factors.

Both individuals and organizations must develop the ability to be steadfastly focused. The journey of excellence depends on our ability to withstand pressure. When we are clear-headed, good decisions seem to flow and intense focus yields productive gains. However, if pressure results in undue tension and anxiety, then the opportunity for excellence is overwhelmed by the loss of emotional control and good judgment becomes scarce.

Excellence for the All Blacks is summed up by an important mantra, “Champions do extra!” Without this willingness, success would be fleeting. The process to build excellence depends on our ability to reject cynicism in favor of hope, legacy and vision.

James Kerr writes, “character is the mark left on you by life, and the mark we leave on life.” Excellence is indeed our life’s work, and it is never too early or too late to begin.

To learn more, read “Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life” by James Kerr. 

Editor’s note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.