My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

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I should not, I suppose, be surprised by the fact that most people learn very slowly, if at all; after all, not very much of any real value came quickly to me, and it damned sure never came easily.

Sixty years ago, then being very interested in several subjects, I initially tried to learn anything that I could by reading everything that I could put my hands on; and, at first, I tended to believe a large part of what I read. Next I tried to determine the identity of the most widely recognized experts in the fields that interested me, and then I started communicating with these people; and, somewhat to my surprise, all of the experts that I was able to locate responded to my letters. So then I started visiting these people, in an attempt to learn as much as possible from them; and again they responded favorably and always welcomed my visits.

All of these people were very friendly, and many of them went to rather great lengths in their attempts to help me; did so in spite of the fact that I had nothing to offer them in return. A response that is no longer very common; today, most such letters would never be answered, and a visit would probably get you thrown out on your ass. Why the difference? I don't really know, but I suspect that the obvious difference is due to the fact that very few people were at all interested in the things that I was at that time; perhaps, having encountered very few people with similar interests, they were pleased by anybody who shared their interests.

All of these people are now dead, which is not surprising considering the fact that they were all much older than I was when I first contacted them, but at least some of them are still generally considered to be among the leading experts in their chosen fields of interest. Which is somewhat ironic, since I now know that none of them really understood anything of any real value, and several of them were outright frauds. Some of them were sincere, a few were honest, but none of them knew much of any value.

Unless my memory is now playing some terrible tricks on me, I can still clearly remember most of the things that these people told me; the important difference between then and now being the fact that I now know that most of these things were not true, and the additional fact being that I wasted a lot of time because I believed many things that turned out not to be true. As a consequence of these experiences I eventually learned to be very suspicious about everything that I heard or read; although, in fact, I was not always as suspicious as I should have been.

None of which is intended to imply that I never met any "good" people; in fact, I have known quite a few, but it does not follow that they were very knowledgeable. My biggest problems usually occurred when I was in a position where I was forced to trust the opinions of other people because I was dealing with things that I knew nothing about; my business today is largely based upon computer technology, but I am computer illiterate and would not even know how to turn a computer on if my life depended upon it. That being the case, I was forced to turn to other people for advice; one result of that being that I then had to go through a very long list of supposed computer experts before I ever found one who actually knew just what the hell he was doing. Another result of that being that I was forced to waste several years and millions of dollars before I did find people who really were computer experts. Eventually I did find them, but it was a long, slow, and very painful process, and it cost me more money than most people will ever make in a lifetime.

So unless you simply insist upon repeating a long list of my earlier mistakes, I strongly suggest that you become very suspicious about anything that you read or hear, particularly when such statements come from people that are trying to get some of your money.

I still believe that most of the people in this country are good people, that they will do the right thing if given the chance; but I also know that very little is ever heard from or about the good people, while we are constantly exposed to a flood of dangerous bullshit from and about the politicians and the so-called "beautiful people." Somebody recently stated that 20 percent of the adults in this country are illiterate, but that 90 percent of the people who appear as guests on television talk shows are illiterate; which last statement is probably fairly accurate but does not go far enough since I believe that 100 percent of the hosts of talk shows are illiterate. Or are, at least, totally disinterested in the truth, which is worse that being illiterate.

During the course of a seminar at the School of Medicine of the University of Florida, where I was the principle speaker last Friday (as I am twice each month), one of the members of the audience asked me why I am so disturbed by the outrages that I see almost everywhere I look; he said . . . "Why don't you just ignore them and go your own way, why do they irritate you so much?" But, as somebody else once said . . . "All it takes for evil to prevail is for good men to remain silent in the face of it."

While I am clearly aware that I cannot stop the outright flood of lies that are published every day on the subject of exercise, I also know that I have been able to reach quite a number of people and to turn their thinking in the direction of common sense; and while such redirection of their beliefs and actions has not always been able to produce the results they were seeking, primarily because such hoped-for results were usually impossible, it has, at least, saved them a great deal of both time and money while avoiding a lot of wasted effort.

As I was in the act of typing the above paragraph, I got a call from a 51-year-old man in Philadelphia who wanted to thank me for pointing him in the direction of sane exercise; having cut his workouts by about ninety percent, he now finds that his results are far better, and that he now feels energetic instead of his previous state of constant exhaustion brought on by overtraining.

Anybody who claims to be able to plan an ideal program of exercise for you is either a fool or a liar, and usually is both; yet, unfortunately, that seems to be what most people are seeking, somebody who will take them by the hand and lead them to the Promised Land. Most of what I have learned about exercise can be truthfully called "negative knowledge," things to be avoided, things that do not work, things that are always foolish, never productive, and sometimes dangerous.

"Positive knowledge," something that does work, is in short supply, and suffers from the fact that it is not consistent from one person to another; that is, what works for you may not work for me, may even be counterproductive for me.

Eleven years ago, we conducted a research program for a period of twenty weeks with twelve sets of identical twins in an attempt to determine the most productive program of exercise for developing quadriceps muscles. At the start of this program we carefully tested the full-range, totally isolated, fresh strength of the subject's quadriceps muscles (leg extension), and then, having determined their fresh level of strength, we exercised them to a point of momentary failure using what appeared to be (based upon their fresh strength) an appropriate level of resistance, with the assumption that they would fail after about ten repetitions of the exercise. But, in fact, some failed after only three or four repetitions while some continued for thirty or more repetitions. Then, immediately after they failed, we tested them again in order to determine their remaining level of strength after the hard exercise.

Some of these subjects lost more than 40 percent of their fresh strength from only three or four repetitions of the exercise, while some others showed no fatigue from the exercise at all, were just as strong after the exercise as they were before it. Fresh and fatigued strength levels were the same.

Such different responses are clear indications of differences in fiber type; a lot of fatigue from brief exercise indicates a higher than usual percentage of fast-twitch fibers in the quadriceps muscles, while little or no fatigue after much more exercise indicates a higher than usual percentage of slow-twitch fibers. But the majority of subjects, about 70 percent of a random group, fall into a different category, have what we call a "usual mixture" of fiber types; these subjects will lose about 20 percent of their fresh strength if worked to failure following ten repetitions of the exercise.

Based upon the results of these three-part testing procedures, we then divided the subjects into three groups, "fast-twitch," "slow-twitch" or "usual mixture." We then assumed that the subjects would produce the best results if they were exercised with what we considered to be an appropriate number of repetitions: from 8 to 10 repetitions to failure with "usual mixture" subjects, from 3 to 6 repetitions to failure with "fast twitch" subjects, and 15 to 20 repetitions to failure with "slow twitch" subjects. Then, having performed these tests and having made those assumptions, we divided the 24 subjects into two groups; twelve subjects were then exercised twice a week for ten weeks with what we considered to be an "ideal" schedule of repetitions, while their identical twins were exercised with what we considered to be an inappropriate number of repetitions. "Appropriate" being, for example, low repetitions for fast-twitch subjects, while "inappropriate" was high repetitions for fast-twitch subjects.

Ten weeks, twenty workouts, later, all subjects were carefully retested in order to determine their results. And, not surprisingly, we found that the subjects who had been exercised in what we considered to be an appropriate manner did much better, markedly better, than those that were exercised in an inappropriate manner.

Then we "switched" them; subjects that were initially exercised in an appropriate manner started using an inappropriate number of repetitions. And this program was continued for another ten weeks. And, again, in general the results were pretty much what we had expected: subjects who did poorly while using an inappropriate number of repetitions suddenly started producing rapid increases in strength when switched to an appropriate number of repetitions, and vice versa.

But, kindly note, I said "in general," because, in fact, we encountered one exception to that rule. One set of identical twins were very large men in their mid-thirties, and during the first ten weeks the twin who was exercised appropriately did much better than his brother who was exercised inappropriately; but, when "switched" after ten weeks, this man still did much better than his brother, even when exercised in an inappropriate manner while his brother used appropriate exercise.

But please do not ask me to explain this surprising result; it happened, but I don't know why.

During every exercise all subjects were carefully supervised and "pushed" in order to make sure that they were working as hard as possible, so the difference was not a result of one twin "goofing off" during the exercise.

And just what does this tell you? It should tell you that only you can determine just what is "right" and what is "wrong" for you, information that can be gained only by trial and error.