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Fun top 10 lists to make

Last updated on March 17, 2020 Josh Waitzkin has led a full life as chess champion and international martial arts champion, and as this is written he is not yet 35. The Art of Learning: An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance chronicles his journey from chess prodigy (and the subject of the film Searching for Bobby Fischer) to the World Cup Tai Chi Chuan with important experiences identified and explained along the way. Marketing expert Seth Godin has written and said that one must decide to change three things as a result of reading a business book; the reader will find many lessons in Waitzkin's volume. Waitzkin has a list of principles that appear throughout the book, but it's not always clear exactly what the principles are and how they bind together. This doesn't really harm the book's readability, though, and it's at best a minor drawback. There are many lessons for educator or leader, and as someone who teaches college, was president of the chess club in middle school, and who began studying martial arts about two years ago, I found the book engaging, edifying, and instructive. Waitzkin's chess career began among hustlers in New York's Washington Square, and he learned to concentrate among the noise and distractions this brings. This experience taught him the ins and outs of aggressive chess games as well as the importance of perseverance from the secretive players with whom he interacted. He was discovered in Washington Square by chess teacher Bruce Pandolfini, who became his first coach and developed him from a prodigious talent into one of the best young players in the world. The book presents Waitzkin's life as a study in contrasts; perhaps this is intentional given Waitzkin's admitted fascination with Eastern philosophy. Among the most useful lessons relates to the aggression of park chess players and young prodigies who brought their queens into action early, or who set elaborate traps and then threw themselves at opponents' mistakes. These are excellent ways to quickly send weaker players, but it doesn't build up stamina or skill. He compares these approaches with the attention to detail that leads to true mastery in the long run. According to Waitzkin, an unfortunate reality in chess and martial arts – and perhaps by extension in teaching – is that people learn many superficial and sometimes impressive tricks and techniques without developing a subtle, nuanced command of the basic principles. Tricks and traps can impress (or defeat) gullible, but they are of limited use against someone who really knows what he or she is doing. Strategies that rely on fast checkmates are likely to falter against players who can deflect attacks and get one into a long interlude. Smashing inferior players with four-move checkmates is superficially satisfying, but it does little for better one's game. He offers a child as an anecdote who won many battles against inferior opposition but who refused to embrace real settlement for a large number of victories over clearly inferior players (p. 36-37). This reminds me of advice I got from a friend recently: always try to make sure you're the dumbest person in the room so you always learn. Many of us, though, draw our self-esteem from being big fish into small ponds. Waitzkin's discussions cast chess as an intellectual boxing match, and they are particularly apt given his discussion of martial arts later in the book. Those familiar with boxing will remember Muhammad Ali's strategy against George Foreman in the 1970s: Foreman was a heavy hitter, but he had never been in a long fight before. Ali won with his rope-a-dope strategy, patiently absorbing Foreman's punches and waiting for Foreman to exhaust himself. His lesson from chess is apt (p. 34-36) as he discusses promising young players who focused more intensely on winning quickly rather than developing their games. Waitzkin builds on these stories and contributes to our understanding of learning in chapter two by discussing unity and step-by-step approaches to learning. Unit theorists believe that things are innate; thus one can play chess or do karate or be an economist because he or she was born to do so. Therefore, failure is deeply personal. In contrast, incremental theorists see loss as opportunities: step by step, the novice can gradually become the master (p. 30). They rise to the occasion when presented with difficult material, because their approach is oriented towards mastering something over time. The unitary esons are collapsing under pressure. Waitzkin contrasts his approach, where he spent a lot of time dealing with playoff strategies in which both players had very few plays. In return, he said, many young students begin by learning a wide range of initial variations. This damaged their game in the long run: (m) all very talented kids are expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a match, they were emotionally unprepared. For some of us, pressure becomes a source of paralysis, and errors are the beginning of a downward spiral (p. 60, 62). However, as Waitzkin argues, a different approach is needed if we are to reach our full potential. A fatal flaw of shock-and-awe, blitzkrieg approach to chess, martial arts, and ultimately something to be learned is that everything can be learned by rote. Waitzkin derides martial arts practitioners who become form collectors with fancy kicks and twirls that have absolutely no fighting value (p. 117). You can say the same thing about problem sets. This is not to gainsay fundamentals-Waitzkin's focus in Tai Chi was to refine certain basic principles (p. 117) -but there is a profound difference between technical skills and true understanding. Knowing the moves is one thing, but knowing how to decide what to do next is quite another. Waitzkin's intense focus on refined fundamentals and processes meant he remained strong in the later round, while opponents withered. His approach to martial arts is summarized in this passage (p. 123): I had condensed my body mechanics into a potent state, while most of my opponents had large, elegant and relatively impractical repertoires. The fact is that when there is intense competition, those who succeed have slightly more honed skills than the rest. It is rarely a mysterious technique that drives us to the top, but rather a deep mastery of what may well be a basic skill set. Depth beats the breadth of any day of the week because it opens a channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden potential. It's about much more than smelling blood in the water. In chapter 14, he discusses the illusion of the mysterious, in which something is so clearly internalized that almost imperceptibly small movements are incredibly powerful as expressed in this quote from Wu Yu-hsiang, writing in the nineteenth century: If the opponent does not move, then I do not move. At the smallest move of the opponent, I move first. A learning-centered view of intelligence means that you connect effort successfully through a process of instruction and encouragement (p. 32). In other words, genetics and raw talent can only get you so far before hard work has to pick up slack (p. 37). Another useful lesson relates to the use of adversity (see p. 132-33). Waitzkin suggests using a problem in an area to customize and strengthen other areas. I have a personal example to back this up. I'll always regret quitting basketball in high school. I remember my sophomore year-my last year playing-I broke my thumb, and instead of focusing on cardiovascular conditioning and other aspects of my game (such as working with my left hand), I waited to recover before I got back to work. Waitzkin offers another useful chapter titled slower time in which he discusses ways to sharpen and utilize intuition. He discusses the process of chunking, which is splitting problems into progressively larger problems, until one makes a complex set of calculations tacitly, without having to think about it. His technical example from chess is particularly instructive in the footnote on page 143. A chess grandmaster has internalized much about checkers and scenarios; the grandmaster can process a much larger amount of information with less effort than an expert. Mastery is the process of turning articulated in the intuitive. There is much that will be familiar to people who read books like this, such as the need to pace themselves, to set clearly defined goals, the need to relax, techniques to get in the zone, and so on. The anecdotes illustrate his points beautifully. During the book, he sets out his method of getting in the zone, another term that people in performance-based professions will find useful. He calls it the soft zone (chapter three) and it consists of being flexible, malleable and able to adapt. Martial artists and by David Allen's Getting Things Done may recognize this as having a mind like water. He contrasts with the hard zone that requires a collaborative world for you to function. Like a dry twig, you're crazy, ready to snap under pressure (p. 54). Soft Zone is resilient, like a flexible blade of grass that can move with and survive hurricane-force winds (p. 54). Another illustration refers to making sandals if faced with a travel consideration of a field of thorns (p. 55). Neither is success based on a submissive world or overwhelming power, but on intelligent preparation and cultivated resilience (p. 55). Much here will be familiar to creative people: you try to think, but that a song of that a band keeps blasting away in your head. Waitzkin's only option was to stay at peace with the noise (p. 56). In the economic language, the restrictions are indicated: We won't be allowed to choose them. This is further examined in Chapter 16. He discusses the best artists, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and others who are not obsessed over the last failure and who know how to relax when they need to (p. 179). The experience of NFL quarterback Jim Harbaugh is also useful as the more he could let things go while the defense was on the field, the sharper he was in the next drive (p. 179). Waitzkin discusses additional things he learned while experimenting in human performance, especially with regard to cardiovascular interval training, which can have a profound effect on your ability to quickly release tension and recover from mental exhaustion (p. 181). It's the last concept - to recover from mental exhaustion – that's probably what most academics need help with. There is much here about pushing boundaries; but one must earn the right to do so: as Waitzkin writes, Jackson Pollock could draw as a camera, but instead he chose to spray paint in a wild way that pulsed with emotion (p. 85). This is another good lesson for academics, managers and educators. Waitzken emphasizes great attention to detail when receiving instruction, especially from his Tai Chi instructor William C.C. Chen. Tai Chi is not about offering resistance or power, but about the ability to interfere with (an opponent's) energy, give in to it, and overcome with softness (p. 103). The book is filled with stories of people who didn't reach their potential because they didn't seize opportunities to improve or because they refused to adapt to conditions. This lesson is highlighted in Chapter 17, where he discusses making sandals when confronted with a difficult path, such as an underhanded competitor. The book contains several principles that we can become better educators, researchers and leaders. Celebrating the results should be secondary in celebrating the processes that yielded these results (p. 45-47). There's also a study in contrasts beginning on page 185, and that's something I've struggled to learn. Waitzkin on themselves on the Be able to relax between matches while some of his opponents were pressured to analyze their games in between. This leads to extreme mental fatigue: this tendency of competitors to exhaust themselves between rounds of tournaments is surprisingly widespread and very self-defeating (p. 186). The art of learning has much to teach us regardless of our field. I found it particularly relevant given my chosen profession and my decision to start studying martial arts when I started teaching. The insights are numerous and useful, and the fact that Waitzkin has used the principles he now learns to become a world class competitor in two very demanding competitive companies makes it so much easier to read. I recommend this book to anyone in a position of leadership or in a position that requires extensive learning and adaptation. That is, I recommend this book to everyone. More on LearningFeatured photo credit: Jazmin Quaynor via unsplash.com unsplash.com

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