Pat Riley on the Remarkable Power of Getting 1% Better

written by JAMES CLEAR | CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, DELIBERATE PRACTICE, GOAL SETTING

This article is an excerpt from Atomic Habits, my New York Times bestselling book.

In 1986, the Los Angeles Lakers had one of the most talented basketball teams ever assembled, but they are rarely remembered that way. The team started the 1985–1986 NBA season with an astounding 29–5 record. "The pundits were saying that we might be the best team in the history of basketball," head coach Pat Riley said after the season. [1] Surprisingly, the Lakers stumbled in the 1986 playoffs and suffered a season-ending defeat in the Western Conference Finals. The "best team in the history of basketball" didn't even play for the NBA championship.

After that blow, Riley was tired of hearing about how much talent his players had and about how much promise his team held. He didn't want to see flashes of brilliance followed by a gradual fade in performance. He wanted the Lakers to play up to their potential, night after night. In the summer of 1986, he created a plan to do exactly that, a system that he called the Career Best Effort program or CBE. [2]

Step 1: Taking Their Number

"When players first join the Lakers," Riley explained, "we track their basketball statistics all the way back to high school. I call this Taking Their Number. We look for an accurate gauge of what a player can do, then build him into our plan for the team, based on the notion that he will maintain and then improve upon his averages."

You'll notice that Riley was interested in the average speed of his players. His first calculation was to see what a player's normal day looked like, not his best day.

After determining a player's baseline level of performance, Riley added a key step. He asked each player to "improve their output by at least 1 percent over the course of the season. If they succeeded, it would be a CBE, or Career Best Effort." [3]

Riley was careful to point out that CBE was not merely about points or statistics but about giving your "best effort spiritually and mentally and physically." Players got credit for "allowing an opponent to run into you when you know that a foul will be called against him, diving for loose balls, going after rebounds whether you are likely to get them or not, helping a teammate when the player he's guarding has surged past him, and other 'unsung hero' deeds."

Step 2: Calculating Your Career Best Effort

I don't know Riley's exact formula, but here's what the CBE calculation might look like in practice:

As an example, let's say that Magic Johnson—the Lakers star player at the time—had 11 points, 8 rebounds, 12 assists, 2 steals, and 5 turnovers in a game. Magic also got credit for an "unsung hero" deed by diving after a loose ball (+1). Finally, he played a total of 33 minutes in this imaginary game.

The positive numbers (11 + 8 + 12 + 2 + 1) add up to 34. Then, we subtract the 5 turnovers (34 – 5) to get 29. Finally, we divide 29 by 33 minutes played.

29/33 = 0.879

Magic's CBE number here would be 879. This number was calculated for all of a player's games, and it was the average CBE that a player was asked to improve by 1 percent over the season.

Step 3: Historical Comparisons

Riley compared each player's current CBE to not only their past performances but also those of other players in the league. As Riley put it, "We rank team members alongside league opponents who play the same position and have similar role definitions."

Sportswriter Jackie MacMullan noted, "Riley trumpeted the top performers in the league in bold lettering on the blackboard each week and measured them against the corresponding players on his own roster. Solid, reliable players generally rated a score in the 600s, while elite players scored at least 800. Magic Johnson, who submitted 138 triple-doubles in his career, often scored over 1,000."

The Lakers also emphasized year-over-year progress by making historical comparisons of CBE data. Riley said, "We stacked the month of November, 1986, next to November, 1985, and showed the players whether they were doing better or worse than at the same point last season. Then we showed them how their performance figures for December, 1986, stacked up against November's."

Imagine you're one of the players. Every week you walk into the locker room and see your name ranked alongside Michael Jordan or Larry Bird or some other competitor across the league. You're constantly aware of how you are performing relative to the competition and relative to your average performance. It is impossible to lie to yourself about whether you are playing well or poorly. You are are constantly aware of your choices, your actions, and your performance.

Compare that situation to how most of us live our lives. We don't track or measure the things that we say are important to us. We make excuses, create rationalizations, and lie to ourselves about our daily performance. We have no evidence of whether we are performing

better or worse compared to previous months or years. It's not hard to see why the Career Best Effort program delivered results.

The Results of Career Best Effort

The Lakers rolled out CBE in October 1986. Eight months later, they were NBA champions. The following year, Pat Riley led his team to another title as the Lakers became the first team in twenty years to win back-to-back NBA championships. Afterward, he said, "Sustaining an effort is the most important thing for any enterprise. The way to be successful is to learn how to do things right, then do them the same way every time." [4]

What Makes Great Performers Great?

There is a surprisingly narrow gap that separates the good performance from the great performance. And that narrow gap is separated by small habits and daily rituals.

It is so easy to dismiss the value of making slightly better decisions on a daily basis. Sticking with the fundamentals is not impressive. Falling in love with boredom is not sexy. Getting one percent better isn't going to make headlines.

There is one thing about it though: it works.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 20 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here.

FOOTNOTES ▸

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Clear writes about habits, decision making, and continuous improvement. He is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller, Atomic Habits. The book has sold over 20 million copies worldwide and has been translated into more than 60 languages.

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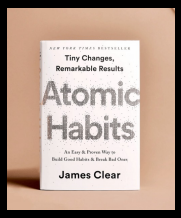

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