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## Can a complete novice become a golf pro with 10,000 hours of practice?

By [Michael Kruse](#), Times staff writer

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Testing researchers' theory that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice can lift an ordinary person to excellence, Dan McLaughlin practices chip shots at Mangrove Bay Golf Course in St. Petersburg. McLaughlin had never golfed before he conceived The Dan Plan: to put in 10,000 hours of practice and become good enough to play the game professionally.

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[SCOTT KEELER | Times]

One wet, raw day last April, at the Broadmoor public golf course in Portland, Ore., Dan McLaughlin stood in the center of one of the greens. He wore running shoes, blue jeans and a yellow rubber raincoat. He wrapped his frozen fingers around a two-buck putter and hit one-foot putts, and he did that for two hours straight, stopped for a cup of hot, decaffeinated tea, then did it for two hours more. That's how this started.

On his 30th birthday, June 27, 2009, Dan had decided to quit his job to become a professional golfer.

He had almost no experience and even less interest in the sport.



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What he really wanted to do was test the 10,000-hour theory he read about in the Malcolm Gladwell bestseller *Outliers*. That, Gladwell wrote, is the amount of time it takes to get really good at anything — "the magic number of greatness."

The idea appealed to Dan. His 9-to-5 job as a commercial photographer had become unfulfilling. He didn't want just to pay his bills. He wanted to make a change.

Could he stop being one thing and start being another? Could he, an average man, 5 feet 9 and 155 pounds, become a pro golfer, just by trying? Dan's not doing an experiment. He is the experiment.

The Dan Plan will take six hours a day, six days a week, for six years. He is keeping diligent records of his practice and progress. People who study expertise say no one has done quite what Dan is doing right now.

Dan spent last month in St. Petersburg because winters are winters in the Pacific Northwest. "If I could become a professional golfer," he said one afternoon, "the world is literally open to any options for anybody."

• • •

Dan is the youngest son of a family of high achievers. One of his grandfathers was a career IBM man. The other was a civil engineer. His father is an actuary. So is his brother. Actuaries calculate risk. They make statistical predictions about the future based on past performance. His brother graduated with high honors as a math major from Georgia Tech and then did it again in the divinity program at Boston University and now lives and works in New York City and is married with a young daughter. His sister is a dermatologist in Atlanta and a mother of four. She regularly runs marathons.

Dan? He's the only one of his siblings who wasn't confirmed in the Methodist church in which they grew up. He didn't understand why he had to do this just because everybody else was doing this. He was 12.

Within his immediate family, he said, "I'm definitely the one with the most wander in my heart."

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He went to Fiji with no guidebook during a military coup in which he saw men with machine guns at the airport and men with machetes outside. He biked through Thailand and Cambodia. He lived for five months in Australia, where he worked as a waiter because he arrived in the country with no money.

In Portland, throughout his late 20s, he took pictures of dental equipment, which let him buy his own home but also left him with a dissatisfied feeling. There had to be something more.

He started saving money for graduate school. He didn't eat out or go to first-run movies and he rented out rooms in his house. He managed to save \$100,000. When it came time to apply to grad school, though, that didn't feel right, either.

Shelves and shelves of self-help books are stocked in America with the canon of the quick fix. The 10,000-hour concept, though, is based on academic research into the idea that success is a choice — made, not born. At first glance, it feels like a very American idea — you can be anything you want to be — but it is an unsentimental view of the world. It helps to be tall in basketball, and it helps to start violin lessons at a young age, but what separates the few truly great from the many merely good is not talent or magic or luck. It's dedication and discipline.

The secret to success isn't a secret. It's work.

Dan played competitive tennis as a boy, and was good at it, and then quit. He ran one year of cross country in high school, and was good at it, and then quit. He wanted to run on his own. He followed his brother to Boston University for a year and was a physics and math major, and then quit. Instead, he traveled, alone. He graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in photojournalism and was a photographer for a newspaper in Chattanooga, Tenn., for a year, and then quit.

He has started five novels.

He took one piano lesson.

When Dan first told his family about The Dan Plan, his father thought: *In 10,000 hours, you could become a doctor.* He wondered what to tell his son. *Don't quit the job you don't like? Don't gamble with your future?* The actuary wanted to tell him those things. The father did not.

But Steve McLaughlin also didn't think his son would take this as far as he has. Neither did his mother. Neither did his brother or his sister or his girlfriend.

"Dan's always been an ideas guy," his brother, Matthew McLaughlin, said. "The fact that he would think of such a thing isn't surprising. But ideas are one thing. Execution is another. He would get frustrated and quit."

At this point, though, more than 1,000 hours and nearly a year into the plan, they're more than surprised. They're impressed.

"He's very driven," said his mother, Susan McLaughlin.

"He seems a little more confident and focused," his father said. "There's not a lot of wasted time."

"I used to think of him as very laid-back, sort of fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants," his sister, Elizabeth Losken, said. "Ever since he started The Dan Plan, I'm seeing his personality is a lot more like mine than I thought possible. I definitely see a kindred spirit in him. I see him being a lot more dedicated to what he's doing."

Both his siblings are also something they didn't expect to be.

"There have been times," his sister said, "when I've been envious."

Said his brother: "I got out of high school, went to college, went to grad school, got a job . . ."

"I think it's the reason he's doing this," said Marijke Dixon, his live-in girlfriend in Portland.

"He needs to succeed at something, but it can't be on their terms. I think he's trying to come to terms with it, his need to succeed, but in his own way."

"I think the takeaway for me," his brother said, "would be that you can be a lot more than you are, that there's a lot more room for excellence than we typically admit to ourselves."

• • •

The wind rustled the tops of the palms at the Treasure Bay golf course in Treasure Island. Dan took a practice swing. He took another.

He has three clubs in his bag, a putter, a chipper and a wedge. That's it. That's because of his coach.

Back when he first pitched his idea to Christopher Smith, a Nike-affiliated coach who has written a book about golf, Smith was not just uninterested. He was insulted. Golf is famously frustrating. Smith told Dan it was much harder than he thought. He told him to Google K. Anders Ericsson at Florida State University, a psychology professor and a leading expert on expertise.

Dan Googled him. Then called him. Then read his scholarly work. Smith started to think Dan was more committed than he had originally thought. Perhaps Dan was an opportunity. How would he teach golf to a person who was relatively fit, clearly willing and totally untouched, with no bad habits to undo because there were no habits at all?

Dan persuaded Smith to coach him. He got Nike to give him some free shoes, clothes and clubs. He set up a Twitter account, a Facebook page and a blog at thedanplan.com. By now, on Dan's loose team of interested consultants are Smith, Ericsson, a personal trainer in Portland and a professor of kinesiology at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Here's how they have Dan trying to learn golf: He couldn't putt from 3 feet until he was good enough at putting from 1 foot. He couldn't putt from 5 feet until he was good enough putting from 3 feet. He's working away from the hole. He didn't get off the green for five months. A putter was the only club in his bag.

Everybody asks him what he shoots for a round. He has no idea. His next drive will be his first.

In his month in Florida, he worked as far as 50 yards away from the hole. He might — might — have a full set of clubs a year from now.

At Treasure Bay, with the Intracoastal and the causeway in the distance, he whacked a sharp low shot into a fence. It skidded into some seashells and crabgrass. He sliced another ball into a lake. A startled duck jerked its head. He lofted a chip toward the hole and the ball rolled toward the cup. And past it. Too long.

To this point, Dan says, he has ended up liking golf more than he thought he would. It feels like a puzzle, he has found, always a challenge, never the same shot twice. It feels good, he says, to work and work and then to finally hit one the way he's supposed to hit it, just right.

He lofted another chip toward the hole.

And almost into it.

"Everybody hits bad shots," he said. "But it's how you recover from those bad shots that matters."

• • •

Late last month Dan drove a small rented Nissan up to Tallahassee for a conference at Florida State on performance and expertise. Ericsson was scheduled to speak. So was Dan. Ericsson invited him.

On the campus, in a classroom, Dan listened to smart people say interesting things about data compiled and experiments done.

Then it was his turn.

"I live in Portland, Oregon, and I'm 31 years old," he said at the start of his presentation.

He showed them his bag with three clubs. He put up PowerPoint graphs charting his gradual improvement in putting and chipping.

There are more than 27 million people in this country who play golf. There are 125 permanent spots on the PGA Tour. Smith has told Dan the odds of him earning one of those spots are astronomically long. He picked golf, Dan says, because he wanted something not impossible but close. He grants that there's a "99 percent chance I'm not going to become a PGA golfer." But that's not the point.

"Basically," he told the people at the conference, "what I'm trying to do with this project is demonstrate how far you're able to go if you're willing to put in the time.

"I'm testing human potential."

Everybody in the classroom clapped for Dan and his plan.

Outside, Ericsson said to Dan, "I'm so intrigued here by your commitment to do this."

People, of course, have become world-class after practicing 10,000 hours, in golf and tennis and violin or anything else. But never, not in anything, according to Ericsson, has anyone done it like this: to start at this age, with no experience, and to keep statistics from the beginning, and to be so self-reflective about it, and to last even this long. Dan, Ericsson says, is "like Columbus here, sailing out in new territory."

Ericsson asked Dan if he had any questions.

Questions?

Sometimes it feels like it's all he has.

How is he doing? What if all he's doing is getting really good at practicing golf and not at playing it? How will he know?

What will success look like?

Failure?

Back in St. Petersburg, he said, "I don't think it can fail, because it's not really about me or

what ultimately happens with me. It's about blazing a new path and kind of trying to change the way people see life's possibilities."

On the drive to Tallahassee, he said, "If I put in those 10,000 hours, in my eyes, no matter the outcome, I will have been successful. Because I think I'll be much more in tune with my abilities."

On the drive back, he said, "One of the things I'm learning in this process is the ability to overcome frustrations, and that's a huge part of golf. That's a huge part of anything, I guess, right?"

Maybe he will become a pro golfer. Maybe he will become an excellent golfer. Maybe he will become an average golfer. Maybe he won't.

He's certain, though, that won't be the ultimate measure of success. Success, he has found, is in the sincerity of the pursuit.

"I like where I am in life right now," he said, eyes on the road ahead, 8,803 hours to go.

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