

Turning Misery into Joy – A Training Journey

Rande Treece, April 2005

This article is a personal reflection on my first five years back as a track and field competitor. I competed in college, and then returned after 13 years off, at the age of 39. As a Master, I have won a National Championship (in the 56# weight throw) and have ended the year ranked #1 in the hammer, or 35# weight, or 56# weight throw, or all three for one or more of the last few years. However, I have managed to rob the joy from training and competing, I have not had fun and now I want to quit. I wrote this article to try and figure out why I make what should be fun so miserable.

Great American Myth

I believe it starts with my assumptions. We're taught when we are young that we can be whatever we want. That if we work, or try hard enough, we can achieve anything. Sayings like these can become underlying assumptions and beliefs that govern our life.

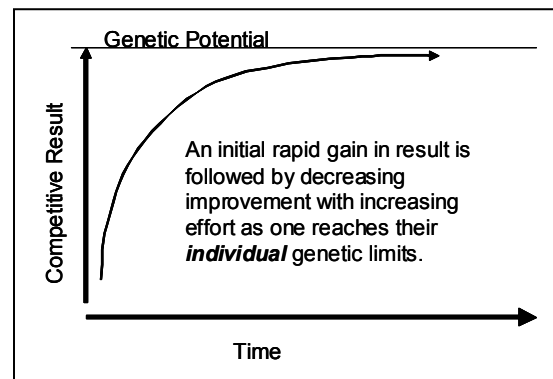
But, we often do not realize that the way we live is governed by our basic assumptions. For instance, if one believes that people are the masters of their universe and they alone create all good and bad that happens to them, then those beliefs will drive them to try and control their lives and the lives of those around them. However, if one believes that they are the victims of the whims of fate, then they might tend to passively live their lives blaming all of their failings on external forces, such as "them". I believe life is actually somewhere between those two extremes.

There is a corollary with athletics. If one assumes that any person who works hard enough can achieve any result, then they will continually blame themselves when they do not achieve the results of the few

great achievers. Likewise, if one assumes that no matter how hard they train they will always be "hard gainers," then they will not work as hard as they need to achieve results as high as they could.

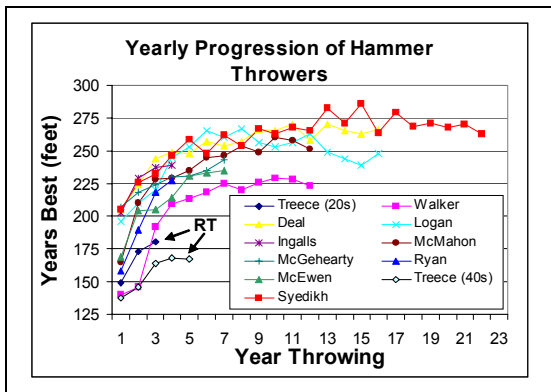
Real World Truth

I believe the truth lies between the two extremes. Hard training, intelligently applied, can lead most people to achieve good results. People do have genetic limitations. However, those natural limits may be at a level far above where the individual is currently performing. The progression of a trainee follows a path as illustrated in the figure below.



Progress, as shown on the left axis, increases rapidly in the early part of a career. The first few months, or years, of training can bring rapid gains as the athlete learns the technique and builds initial strength. However, the personal records (PRs) stop coming as fast and then there are meets that have a lower result than an earlier meet. After some period of time, the athlete is working very hard for relatively small gains. They have reached a period of leveling off, where they have achieved a mature level of technique and strength. If they remain in the sport long enough they experience decline due to the effects of aging.

This progression and leveling off is apparent in the progress of hammer throwers. The yearly best marks for selected hammer throwers are shown in the figure below.



These marks represent their entire careers from their first to their last season (as of the date of the chart). The world record holder, American record holders, as well as other athletes who were gracious enough to send me their results is presented. It is instructive that the general shape of the data lines follows the asymptotic line shown in the first figure. The athletes who attained 250' did not do so until at least their 5th year of throwing and the world record holder reached his PR in his 13th year. (I have a short article that appeared in Long & Strong Throwers Journal discussing hammer throwing progress. If you would like a copy that article, just send me an email and I'll send it to you: randemrg@yahoo.com)

Personal Application

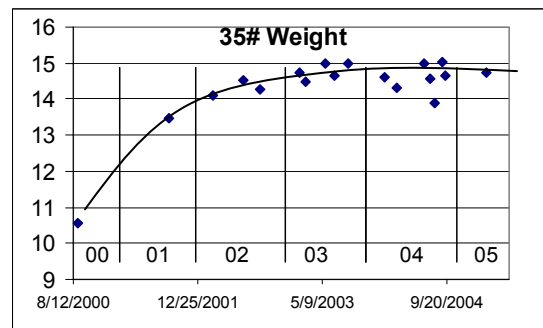
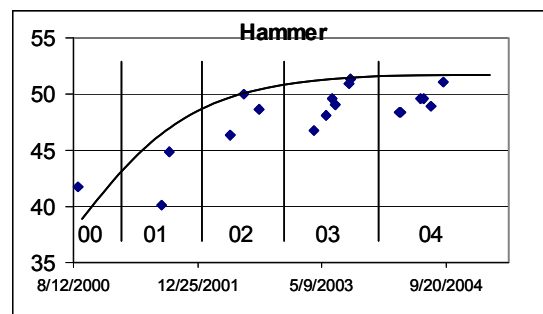
My results from college and masters meets are also on the chart (labeled RT). My progress during both periods definitely conforms to the asymptotic shape. It does not take a genius to notice that my progression in either period is not at the level of Sedykh, Deal, or Logan.

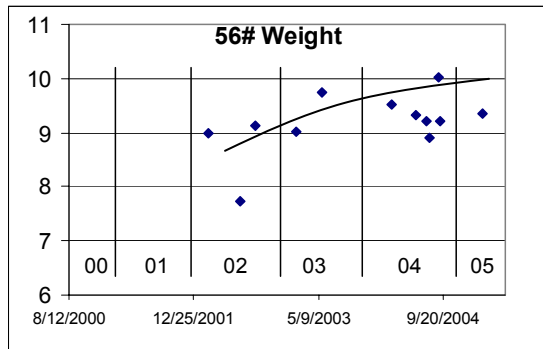
During college my lack of progress was not due to lack of trying. I trained at my physical limits with little regard to my schooling or long term health. I had a good coach and used the same methods as the

champions. However, by the end of college after three years of throwing I only achieved a PR in the hammer throw of only 180'. Similarly, as a Masters athlete I have trained at close to my limits of time and health for a working, family man.

The fact that I have trained and tried so hard makes it difficult for me to look closely at my progress and apparent lack thereof. I say lack of progress because my goals have been big. I've wanted to throw the hammer 60m and the weight 60 feet. That's all, just 60 and 60. Those marks won't even qualify for an Open National Championship. Each of those marks seemed within reach of anyone who trained hard. However, not only did I not reach those distances (in college or as a Master), I have not even surpassed my college marks of 55m and 50 feet.

So, I'm trying to understand the consequences of genetic limitations, and the impact they have on goal setting. Consider the three charts below. I have plotted my meet results for the hammer, 35#, and 56# weight since I returned to T&F 5 years ago.





Several trends emerge from the graphs. First, and most important is the fact that there has been very little, or no progress in my season bests for the last couple of seasons. It appears that I have reached the flat part of the asymptote in my career. I may have some improvements, but the notion that I will throw the hammer 60m is very unlikely at this point.

Another trend is that in the hammer throw I tend to improve over the course of a season ending with my best throws at my biggest meet.

A third trend I see in my weight throws is that there is a huge amount of variability from one meet to another. This is very odd to me. One week I am throwing near my PR and the next week I am throwing below the level I did two years back.

The conclusion I draw from the three trends in my data discussed above, together with the fact that I feel that I cannot train any harder, is that I have probably reached a point that is greater than 95% to 98% of my genetic potential for my current age. From this point forward, with a great deal of work, I am likely to perform at about the level I did the previous year. That is until the effects of age begin to diminish my ability further. (I am now 44 years old.)

Facing My Own Genetic Limits

Now while this line of reasoning may seem defeatist to some, it is freeing for me. I now

believe that no matter how hard I train, I simply cannot throw the competition hammer and weight 60m and 60 feet. For some reason, the combination of size, fast twitch fiber, and coordination that God gave me at birth cannot be trained to heave the hammers that far.

The realization and acceptance of my own genetic limits can release me from the torment of trying to reach goals I simply cannot attain.

That is why I have not enjoyed my athletic journey to this point. I had a predetermined destination of throwing certain distances that stayed completely out of reach of my abilities. I did not enjoy the journey, because I could not arrive at my chosen destination.

Every workout and every meet simply served to remind me that I was not throwing 60m or 60 feet. Breaking PRs didn't matter. Winning meets didn't matter. Being the highest ranked thrower in my age group didn't matter. Winning a National Championship didn't matter. None of those achievements mattered because I was not measuring up to the arbitrary distances I had in my mind of how far I should be able to throw.

What Now?

Now I want to enjoy my training journey. I want to do those things that I enjoy and take the results as they come.

For example, I will lift more, train for fitness more, and lose some body fat. While I was trying to throw 60 and 60 I spent a very large amount of my time throwing and doing drills, and less time lifting. This was because I believed that my strength was sufficient to throw much farther than I was throwing. So, even though I really enjoyed lifting I focused on throwing because that was where I was going to get the most

distance for the amount of time and energy I had to train. I also let my body weight go up to > 235# because I believed that a little more counter weight would improve my throwing. I didn't like the way I felt at 235#, but I would tolerate it to throw a little farther.

Now I am going to enjoy the training journey and see where it takes me. I may actually throw even farther than I did before. But even if I don't I'll at least enjoy training and meets because I won't be competing against an unrealistic expectation of unattainable goals.