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Last updated on March 17, 2020 Josh Waitzkin has led a full life as chess champion and international martial arts champion, and at the time of writing he is not yet 35. The Art of Learning: An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance depicts his journey from the chess prodigy (and the theme of the film Searching for Bobby Fischer) to vm Tai Chi Chuan with important lessons identified and explained along the way. Marketing expert Seth Godin has written and said that one should 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 is not always clear exactly what the principles are and how they connect. This doesn't really harm the book's readability, though, and it's at best a slight drawback. There are many lessons for the teacher or leader, and as someone who teaches in 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 the scammers in Washington Square, New York, and he learned to concentrate among the noise and distractions this brings. This experience taught him the ins and outs of aggressive chess player as well as the importance of perseverance from cagey 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 tremendous talent to 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 Waitzkins admitted fascination with Eastern philosophy. Among the most useful lessons relate to the aggression of the park's chess players and young prodigies who brought their queens into the action early or who set elaborate traps and then pounced on opponents' mistakes. These are good ways to quickly send weaker players, but it doesn't build stamina or skill. He compares these approaches to attention to detail that leads to real mastery in the long run. According to Waitzkin, an unfortunate reality in chess and martial arts – and perhaps by extension in education – 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) credibly, but they are of limited benefit to anyone who really knows what he or she is doing. Strategies that rely on fast chess buddies are likely to fail against players who can deflect attacks and get one into a long mid-match. Crushing inferior players with four-move chess buddies is superficially satisfying, but it does little to improve one's game. He offers one child as an anecdote who won many battles against inferior resistance but who refused to embrace real determine for a wide range 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 stupidest person in the room so you always learn. Many of us, however, draw our self-worth from being large fish in 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 shout-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 incremental approaches to learning. Device theorists believe 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. However, incremental steoretists see losses as opportunities: step by step, step by step, the beginner can become the champion (p. 30). They rise to the occasion when presented with difficult material because their approach is aimed at mastering something over time. Device theorists collapse under pressure. Waitzkin compares his approach, where he spent a lot of time dealing with end-game strategies in which both players had very few pieces. In comparison, he said, many young students begin by learning a wide range of opening variations. This hurt their game in the long run: (m) some very talented kids expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a game, they were emotionally unprepared. For some of us, the pressure becomes a source of paralysis and failure is the beginning of a downward spiral (p. 60, 62). As Waitzkin argues, however, a different approach is needed if we are to reach our full potential. A fatal error of shock-and-awe, blitzkrieg approach to chess, martial arts, and ultimately all that needs to be learned is that everything can be learned from the mess. Waitzkin derides martial arts athletes who become form collectors with fancy kicks and twirls that have absolutely no fighting value (p. 117). You can say the same about problem sets. This is not for the basics – Waitzkin's focus in Tai Chi was to refine certain basic principles (p. 117), but there is a big difference between technical skills and true understanding. Knowing the moves is one thing, but knowing how to figure out what to do next is something completely different. Waitzkin's intense focus on refined fundamentals and processes meant he remained strong in the later round opponents fortified. His approach to martial arts is summed up 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 repertoire. The fact is that when there is intense competition, those who succeed have a little 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 strikes width at any time of the week, because it opens a channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden potential. This is 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 embodied in this quote from Wu Yu-hsiang, writing in the 19th century: If the adversary does not move, then I do not move. On the opponent's smallest move, I move first. A learning-centered view of intelligence means connecting efforts to success through a process of teaching and encouragement (p. 32). In other words, genetics and raw talent can only get you so far before hard work has to pick up the slack (p. 37). Another useful lesson relates to the use of adversity (cf. p. 132–33). Waitzkin suggests using a problem in one area to customize and strengthen other areas. I have a personal example to back this up. I'll always regret quitting high school basketball. I remember my second year - the last year I played - broke my thumb, and instead of focusing on cardio and other aspects of my game (such as working with my left hand), I waited to recover before returning to work. Waitzkin offers another useful chapter titled slowing down time in which he discusses ways to sharpen and harness intuition. He discusses the process of chunking, which is compartmentalizing problems in gradually larger problems before making a complex set of calculations tacit, 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 a lot about pieces and scenarios; The grandmaster can process a much larger amount of information with less effort than an expert. Mastery is the process of making articulated to 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 lays out his methodology for getting in the zone, another concept 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 to the circumstances. Martial artists and by David Allen's Getting Things Done can recognize this as having a mind like water. He compares this to the hard zone, which requires a cooperative world for you to function. Like a dry twig, you are brittle, ready to snap under pressure (p. 54). The 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 one is confronted with a journey across a field of thorns (p. 55). Neither bases success on a submissive world nor overwhelming power, but on intelligent preparation and cultivated resilience (p. 55). A lot here will be familiar to creative people: you try to think, but the one song of one band continues to blow away in your head. Waitzkin's only option was to stay at peace with the noise (p. 56). In the language of economics, the limitations are given; We can't choose them. This is explored in greater detail in chapter 16. He discusses the best athletes, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and others who are not obsessed with the latest debacle and who know how to relax when they need it (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 further discusses 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). That's the last concept - to recover from mental exhaustion - that's probably what most academics need help with. There is a lot here about pushing boundaries; But one must earn the right to do so: as Waitzkin writes, Jackson Pollock could draw like a camera, but instead he chose to splash paint in a wild way that pulsed with emotion (p. 85). This is another good lesson for academics, leaders and teachers. Waitzken emphasizes careful attention to detail when he receives 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 meddle with (an opponent's) energy, succumve to it and overcome with softness (p. 103). The book is littered with stories of people who did not reach their potential because they did not seize opportunities to improve or because they refused to adapt to the conditions. This lesson is emphasized in chapter 17, where he discusses making sandals when confronted with a thorny path, such as an underhanded competitor. The book contains several principles in which we can become better teachers, scientists, and leaders. Celebrating results should be secondary to celebrating the processes that produced these results (p. 45-47). There is also a study in contrasts beginning on page 185, and it is something I have struggled to learn. Waitzkin points to himself on to 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-destructive (p. 186). The art of learning has a lot to teach us independently 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 insight is many 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 much easier to read. I recommend this book to everyone in a leadership position 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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