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## Swagger or Humility or Swagger and Humility: A New Goal for Educating Students With Gifts and Talents

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. (Vonnegut, 1961)

Vonnegut's story *Harrison Bergeron* is a clever way of satirizing society's naïve notion of egalitarianism and the effects it has on the development of children. As an aging professor who focuses on the psychology of gifted students, I have observed many gifted students in many different environments. A year ago I watched a team of outstanding eighth-grade volleyball players, including several academically gifted students, perform its magic on the court. Once again, they easily beat their opponent, but more importantly, it was their behavior and dispositions that I found noteworthy. This was a group of twelve 13-year-old girls who emanated confidence. To describe them as a mere team does not do them justice. They were a gang. Their relationship with each other had rules and expectations. They were great as individual players; but they were even greater as a team. They walked around with their heads way up, backs arched—almost strutting. They were manifesting—dare I say, swagger. A person manifesting swagger exudes pride and confidence. It is an audacious manner and you see it in the highly accomplished from all occupations.

To understand why the girls' swagger matters, it must be put into its context. These young

athletes play volleyball for the Burriss Laboratory School (Burriss), a part of Teachers College at Ball State University. Burriss is a K–12 school with 500 students. The high school volleyball team has won 18 state championships, including 10 in a row. Moreover, they have won four national championships and were runners-up on three occasions. The coach of the high school team has a record of approximately 1,070 and 88, including the 2004 national champions who went 40 and 0. Years ago, a community volleyball program began that attempted to develop the talent of hundreds of young girls. Over the past 20 years, the success has spread to several other programs surrounding Muncie, IN (a small city of about 65,000 inhabitants), with several state championships being won across the different classes of schools. Making the Burriss high school volleyball team accomplishments even more impressive is the fact that students cannot transfer into the school. Students are admitted through a lottery system as Kindergartners, and then some siblings can get in when there are openings. This means that Burriss cannot recruit any student athletes; they coach the players they have.

The team of eighth-grade girls exists therefore as athletes roughly at the midpoint of this talent development model. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe it as a talent development community. Consequently, their swagger is in the context of being outstanding, dedicated athletes within a community of extraordinary support of girls' athletic talent. By this point in their lives, they have played volleyball for several years. Unlike the citizens of Harrison Bergeron's society, their talents have been lauded and nurtured. They have been allowed to excel and rewarded with attention and respect. Do

intellectually gifted children have similar opportunities?

### Juxtaposition With Academic Talent Development

It is believed by many that unsophisticated notions of elitism are the bane of the field of gifted education. Some claims of elitism are based on an interpretation of the founding of our country as inherently egalitarian. Educational opportunities that are tailored to student abilities are determined to be inherently elitist and therefore anti-egalitarian. Humility is often described as a corollary to egalitarianism. Obviously then, swagger would not be acceptable to those who hold these beliefs. This concern only seems to hold in the context of schooling, especially as it pertains to gifted students. For example, we reward professional athletes in some sports who become infamous due to their outrageous behavior (e.g., steroid use). The better they become known, the more we expect them to violate decorum and the more we reward them for doing so. This has been true for so long now that social expectations have actually changed to accommodate the extremes. In the early stages of the development of these professional athletes, swagger was evident but kept under wraps. Once athletics move from the so-called amateur ranks to the professional, a shift in the expectations of both the athlete and the audience occurs. Some professional athletes, while revered by their audience for their extraordinary abilities, are actually rewarded when they act in some socially inappropriate ways.

A commonality in the development of great athletes and great intellects is the fact that much of their training and opportunities to develop occur within

our school communities. They sit side by side and sometimes quite literally in the same seat (student-athletes) in the classroom. Some athletes are so talented that they develop quickly and are embraced by the professionals right out of high school (e.g., LeBron James), but most continue their development into their college years—again, along with those developing their great minds. The incubator of talent creates differing scripts for appropriate behavior across the varying domains of talent, but with more in common than different. As the talented emerge into their respective professional ranks, they are reborn into a world of vastly different cultures. Although many cultures of work exist, each with rules and regulations, swagger is manifest and even expected in many that celebrate world-class achievement. For example, we expect our athletes to exude confidence. They even engage in pregame rituals to raise their adrenalin to enhance their focus, confidence, and readiness for performance. *They are cultivating swagger to help elevate performance.*

What if we inserted the expectation into our models of developing the talent of our intellectually gifted students that they must develop and manifest swagger? To do so would mean the internalization of pride, the value of hard work, an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, an appreciation of the role of struggle in achievement, an incremental notion of giftedness, compassion, an appreciation of others' abilities, and, yes, humility. To understand greatness, one must be able to recognize it in others. Being appreciative of the greatness of others does not diminish the growth of the aspirant; it creates humility and it becomes a step in the direction of developing the talents of the individual. Requiring our intellectually gifted youth to maintain humility without

swagger dooms them to ignorance as it inserts an unnecessary and disingenuous impediment to world-class performance. Not being able to recognize brilliance does not create egalitarianism, it creates mediocre performance. I have learned that it is an essential ingredient for intellectually gifted students to test their mettle with other great students. Requiring them to take stock in and not to feign ignorance of their own capabilities, both as an individual and as part of a team, will help in the development of their talents. To become world-class one must be able to recognize it. Humility should be rooted in being informed, not from ignorance. Therefore, humility and swagger are merely two sides of the same coin.

Of course, I am not advocating that we teach our children to become arrogant, hostile, or misbehaving. Manners and grace are laudable qualities. I am merely encouraging us to become more sophisticated about talent development and to not focus on the unimportant behaviors that intuitively may seem undesirable. When Don Imus made his ridiculous remarks about the Rutgers women's basketball team, I knew from observing the eighth-grade versions of those fine athletes that they were going to do just fine. Don Imus was no match for the swagger (confidence, pride, poise, and resiliency) and humility (based on understanding the necessity of hard work and struggle on the path to becoming highly accomplished) that comes from developing talents both as individuals and as a team. **GCT**

### References

- Vonnegut, K. (1961). *Harrison Bergeron*. Retrieved September 19, 2007, from <http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/hb.html>