



Igniting The Corporeal/ Cognitive Spark

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One of my favorite hobbies and interests is shooting baskets. I regularly tutor young high school players on free throw and three-point form, so I need to stay in good form myself. Through the years of going to the gym, I've often see Nash (who is in his mid-70s) shooting baskets as well. He typically shoots 100-200 shots each time he's there.

I once told him he was my role model, and that I wanted to be on the same program at his age. I asked him how it was possible that he was the only person in his age group shooting baskets (I often see men in this age group playing golf, or maybe tennis). "Well," Nash told me, "most of them find an excuse to quit—whether it's an elbow, a wrist, a finger, a shoulder or some other body part that keeps them from shooting anymore. I decided to never let those pains become excuses. Something is always going to hurt, and so I decided to just play through the discomfort because once you quit, it only gets worse."

I started thinking about my dad, who used to play H-O-R-S-E with my sons and me when he came to visit. Those games tapered and eventually disappeared altogether as he experienced arthritic pain in his wrist. I decided to call him to tell him about my talk with Nash—knowing it just might stir his competitive juices a bit.

"Kid, I'd love to, but my wrist is so weak. I think it's from all the curveballs I threw when I was younger." (Back in the day, he was a pitcher with a "big deuce," as they used to call it.)

"Well, Dad, disuse certainly doesn't make it any stronger. It's too bad about your wrist, though."

Apparently the spark got lit, and my dad decided to test his ability and strength. Months later, he told me that his wrist was so weak the first day he could hardly get a layup to the hoop. A couple of weeks after that conversation, I got a call from Dad: "You tell your pal down at the gym that your dad went out yesterday in 100-degree heat and put up 150 shots." (He lives in Las Vegas.) I knew his competitive streak would kick in—but something else kicked in as well. Doing something at 77 that he didn't think he could do sparked new possibilities in his mind.

Three years later as I write this, Dad is shooting 150 shots three times a week at the local YMCA—and takes on all comers in shooting contests (he once beat a Division I guard). He absolutely loves shooting and the contests, and it's restored not just a competitive spark but also a new source of energy, vitality and perspicacity as well. Yes, the new physical challenge and strength began pumping new energy and sparks into his mind and spirit. He's fired with the body/mind igniter that lights up when an individual begins taking on physical challenge.

Breakthroughs

Recent findings in neuroscience affirm this phenomenon of firing the mind by challenging the body. The best-selling book *Spark* tells the story of how Dr. John Ratey discovered this connection and began challenging his patients to do the things physically they didn't think they could do—to push their corporeal limits, and to find out what it can do for their mind.

The discovery started with a study of students in Naperville, Ill. In a nation where obesity is ballooning in our youth, the obesity rate in the Naperville system was 1/10th the national average. And in an age where our average students lag the world in math and science aptitudes, the students in the Naperville study scored sixth in the world for math and first for science. The physical and cognitive achievements are absolutely correlated.

Here's the basic chemistry from a guy who got a "B" in high school science. Serotonin, epinephrine and dopamine are highly important neurotransmitters that carry along thoughts and emotions. A lack of serotonin is associated with depression. Exercise increases the flow of serotonin and the others to help increase one's energy, happiness and feelings of calm, etc.

The brain produces accelerated rates of these natural elements when we push ourselves physically. The body at work starts the flow of proteins that travel through the bloodstream, up to the brain, and end up playing a role in the highest thought processes. The bottom line is that our bodies are fueling our brains—the corporeal/cognitive spark.

So what happens when we wane in our physical output? We're aiding and abetting the shrinking of our cognitive function. We can no longer view the corporeal and cognitive functions as distinct and independent of each other. These functions want to work in tandem. Our brains, like any other organ, suffer atrophy from disuse: Use it or lose it. (I still think I deserved a "B+" in science.)

The new rule is: "Charge your mind by challenging your body."

Recently, a friend invited me to join the senior softball league. I told him I had retired from the senior baseball league 20 years ago. "Don't worry about it," he said. "You'll love it."

I'm 57 and figured I might be sort of a rookie in this league, so I decided, "Why not?" What an eye-opener—thinking that a comeback after 20 years was anything special. Our starting first baseman was Dick G., who is 80 years old and in the softball hall of fame. He plays over a hundred games a year and tours with a national over-80 team. He played his position flawlessly and was clearly the best hitter on the field, placing the ball wherever he willed it, deep or shallow. I asked Dick the same question I had asked Nash a few years ago, "Why are you still at it?"

"You quit, you start dying," he replied matter-of-factly. There was certainly nothing slowing down with his mind function either.

Did I mention how I limped for two days after and how bad my back hurts as I write this? It doesn't matter—I'm not taking the bait of ache and pain to convince me I shouldn't be doing certain things at certain ages. It is what it is. Like Nash, Dick and Dad, I think I'm going to just fight through it ... I owe it to my brain.

Mitch Anthony is the author of The New Retirementality (Wiley), now in its fourth edition.