

Listen to this label almost universally used to describe one particular person's career: "the Great One." That's right, one person who's singled out as "the Great One." And his statistics and awards validate that kind of assessment! That person is Wayne Gretzky, the extraordinary, renowned professional hockey player hailing from Canada. Let's take a look at some of the key takeaways gleaned from Gretzky's path, starting with a recap of evidence for that label: "*the Great One.*"

Wayne Gretzky played in the National Hockey League—the NHL—which really straddles two nations, Canada and the United States. Canada has a very rich history in hockey, certainly superior in its emphasis on hockey than the U.S., since Americans tend to also diversify their interests into a wild mix of sports that includes pro football, pro baseball, and pro basketball. At the time of this podcast episode, Gretzky holds the records as the all-time leading goal-scorer, assist-maker, and then also the combination of those two categories, point-scorer. In and of itself, the fact that Gretzky is the all-time assist-maker is one indicator of his emphasis beyond personal goals to team productivity and results. In fact, he led the NHL in season assists in an amazing 16 seasons of his 20 total in the NHL. And, during those two decades, he was league MVP nine times and scored the most points in a season ten times. Ah, "the Great One!"

When he retired, Gretzky held 61 NHL records, whether from regular season activity, the playoffs, or All-Star games. He is widely considered the greatest hockey player ever—at least in the Western hemisphere—by many highly-qualified people who have devoted their professional lives to the sport, whether as players, sportswriters or coaches. The NHL itself uniquely retired Gretzky's jersey #99 across the whole league—not limiting that number with regard to just one team. Wow, that's something never done for any other player! Ah, the Great One—and this short but well-known recap the past couple of minutes reveals why Gretzky's story is worthy of several key takeaways. So here goes...

**Takeaway #1: Don't make superficial assumptions about qualifications.** The hockey world prizes and rewards violent physicality, with what are called "body checks" and fights among players routine in the mix in the attempts to hamper the effectiveness of the opposing team's players. Gretzky was far below average in expected NHL physique—he was not very big or strong in the NHL context...he was kinda skinny, perhaps weighing about 30 pounds less than the typical pro hockey player.

But Gretzky was considered one of the smartest, most perceptive competitors in hockey ever, often evading top adversaries who were sent in the game as physical enforcers. Not insignificantly, Gretzky won the NHL trophy for sportsmanship and performance five times—and one opponent likened attacking Gretzky to attacking the pacifist leader Mahatma Gandhi...and that was a clear mental handicap for that enforcer. Remember the Old Testament comparison of the young David to the giant Goliath. God had not looked at the attributes others considered important...He looked at the heart of David and anointed him with the Spirit of God in preparation for slaying the giant who so many thought was the ultimate fighter.

Here it's also important to consider that Gretzky gave due credit to his importing of evasive skills that he learned from playing lacrosse where he honed his art of evading body checks and blind-side hits. Gretzky did what astute competitors do: transfer needed top skills from one domain to another!

**Takeaway #2: Mentor early and often, but always mentor wisely.** Wayne Gretzky put on skates before he was three years old, and his dad Walter was his mentor. Wayne Gretzky later commented on this as a clear early advantage for him, in that many kids first put on hockey skates much later, say, when seven or eight years old...that's when learning to navigate on ice was a much more awkward skill to learn.

The Gretzky family bought a house with a large, flat back yard that Walter would flood with water every winter in Canada to create an ice rink for his kids. And then he astutely trained Wayne in ways that Gretzky found to be consistently world-class, even in the later context of his world-class career. You see, many an aspiring parent hovers over a promising young child, but very few have the skills to coach wisely. Walter

deeply impacted Wayne with unusual training for some 14 years, and Wayne gives Walter very generous credit for that. Funny anecdote here: the Gretzky's called their backyard ice rink the "Wally Coliseum."

So, what's the parallel idea for organizations? Many people drift in a sea of average. Some are intentionally mentored. But few are mentored at a world-class level. So, what's the parallel for Christians? Same answers, just switch the word *discipled* for the word *mentored*—few are discipled at a world-class level.

Takeaway #3: *Giftng doesn't make perfect, practice makes perfect.* Well, we know that even lots of practice can't make performances perfect, but you get the idea...and you know the importance of intense practice! Over the years, Gretzky's success has been attributed to unusual instincts...a so-called "sixth sense"...somehow, a very special gifting that the typical pro hockey player doesn't have. But Gretzky scoffs at that notion. He credits many hours of practice each day in the dead of winter from a very early age—again, with Wayne unfailingly mentioning the tutelage of his dad Walter running him through the many scenarios, fruitfully coaching Wayne into highly effective, exceptional judgment and on-the-ice responses. Like Gretzky has said about that "instinct:" do you trust doctors based on their instincts...or their practice?

Now, let's back up for a minute. Yes, strong gifting for any great endeavor and career is genuinely foundational before practice. But practice hones that gifting, kicking in to foster exceptional results. But take Gretzky's world-class testimony here: relentlessly practice under the best mentoring you can get!

Takeaway #4: *The very best individual contributor optimizes the entire team.* Former NHL goaltender Ken Dryden wrote this: "[Gretzky] play[ed] a true team game...[he] knew he wasn't big enough, strong enough, or even fast enough to do what he wanted to do if others focused on him. Like a magician, he had to direct attention elsewhere, to his four teammates on the ice with him, to create the momentary distraction in order to move unnoticed into the open ice where size and strength didn't matter...Gretzky made his opponents compete with five players, not one, and he made his teammates full partners to the game. He made them skate to his level and pass and finish up to his level or they would be embarrassed." Evidence? No team in NHL history scored 400 goals a season until 1982 to 1985, when Gretzky's team averaged 423.

Takeaway #5: *"Skate where the puck's going, not where it's been."* These words are the quintessential quote from Walter starting in Wayne's earliest years, and it's the one phrase most widely associated with Gretzky's hockey-playing career—known far and wide to business and nonprofit leaders in many industry sectors. But here's the key: the reason that this phrase is famous is because Gretzky appeared to *actually be doing that over and over again* in the NHL, while his peers in the NHL who were among the very best hockey players in the world clearly and consistently fell short in comparison to Gretzky. Let's face it, the only reason this saying about "where the puck's going" is famous is because Gretzky actually did it!

The key is that almost everyone likes to consider the lessons they discern from the recent past are highly indicative of how to wisely handle the future. Let me repeat that: almost everyone likes to consider the lessons they discern from the recent past as highly indicative of how to wisely handle the future. But this is often not true in our rapidly-changing world. The puck in a big arena of robust business competition may be going in unexpected directions and places that require foresight, flexibility, and quick action. This is an art—and that requires great mentoring, study, understanding, awareness, and practice! And in this very rapidly changing digital era, truly understanding where "the puck's going" is a very rare skill.

The problem with many wannabes is that they love to quote the difficult things that top performers do as if they are fully aware of how to do those difficult things and are doing exactly what's needed. But history shows that most people are definitionally just average in direct comparison to their peers, whether they are a manager, surgeon, hockey player, or CEO. Still, Gretzky's devotion to very high performance is attainable to motivated people who closely study and execute these five takeaways in their context. So, take a deep breath now and consider: how are you and your workplace doing with these Gretzky takeaways? How about you and your church? Amazing opportunities are ahead...with the proper mindset!

