

Chewing Tobacco & Spiritual Discipline

Baseball players are intellectual giants. They're just using a different brain.

Columnist David Brooks recently watched as Dodger second baseman Jeff Kent did infield drills, repeating a process he had probably practiced countless times since his childhood.

"Why," Brooks wondered, after nearly two decades in the pros and probably a lifetime of organized ball, "is Jeff Kent still learning to cover first?"

Brooks goes on to answer his own question, rather elegantly I think. Citing recent research on brain activity, the pundit ponders the idea that athletes consign much of their activity to the subconscious. Our meat-based hard-drives upload some eleven million pieces of information each second (less for Aggies, but still!). The word processing part of the program – our conscious minds – can deal with around .0000036 percent of this capacity. The rest – things like the incredibly complex calculations needed to catch a ball – gets shoved into what Brooks calls "the automatic brain." Jeff Kent was making sure his quadriceps remembered what to do so he could think about other things.

Brooks draws a couple of important conclusions from these facts. "First, habits and etiquette shape the brain." Changing behavior changes reactions better than changing one's mind. "Second, there is a certain kind of practical wisdom that is not taught but is imported through experience."

Maybe the saints can learn something from the shortstops. Maybe the boys of summer can help the children of the kingdom get to first base.

Luke 4.16 says Jesus went to church out of habit. "Custom" translates a Greek noun which gives us the English ethos. We find this habit-word used some four times in the life of Jesus, always with reference to an act of worship or teaching. Paul was a habitual church-goer as well (Acts 17.2). Interesting: after a lifetime of religious training Our Lord still spent Sabbaths learning to cover first.

If Paul (let alone Jesus!) needed these ongoing updates of spiritual muscle memory, you and I are probably not exempt. Brooks' two laws fit nicely in the context of the Christian life. The classic spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, meditation, solitude and the rest are just batting practice, opportunities to reshape my habits until my faith lives more in my synapses

than my cerebral cortex. The most important lessons of the Christian life are only learned in conscious actions designed to shape unconscious reactions.

Concert pianists still play scales every day. Professional athletes perform repetitive drills. Spiritual virtuosity never outgrows spiritual discipline, but grows upon it to heights that can never be reached without that firm, if mundane, foundation.

I Got It!
Doug