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Last updated on 17 March 2020 Josh Waitzkin led a full life as a chess master and international martial arts champion, and as of this writing he is not yet 35 years old. The Art of Learning: The Inner Journey to Optimal Performance chronicles his journey from chess prodigy (and theme of The Search for Bobby Fischer) to the Tai Chi Chuan World Championship with important lessons identified and explained along the way. Marketing expert Seth Godin wrote and said that three things should be decided as a result of reading the business book; 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 bind. It doesn't really harm the book's readability, and it's a minor inconvenience at best. There are many lessons for an educator or leader, and as one who teaches college, he was president of the chess club in high school, and who started studying martial arts about two years ago, the book was interesting, instructive and instructive to me. Waitzkin's chess career began among the mahers of New York's Washington Square, and he learned how to concentrate among the noise and distractions it brings. This experience taught him to play chess aggressively, as well as the importance of endurance from the tricky players with whom he communicated. He was discovered in Washington Square by chess teacher Bruce Pandolfini, who became his first coach and developed him from a prodigious talent to one of the best young players in the world. The book presents Waitzkin's life as a study in contrasts; Perhaps that's intentional given Waitzkin's acknowledged fascination with Eastern philosophy. Among the most useful lessons concerns the aggression of park chess players and young prodigies who brought their queens into action early or who set elaborate traps and then pounced on opposing mistakes. These are excellent ways to quickly send weaker players, but it does not build stamina or skill. He compares these approaches with attention to detail that lead to genuine mastery in the long run. According to Waitzkin, the unfortunate reality in chess and martial arts — and perhaps by expanding education — is that people learn many superficial and sometimes impressive tricks and techniques without developing subtle, nuanced mastery of fundamental principles. Tricks and pitfalls can impress (or beat) gullies, but there are limited usefulness against someone who really knows what they're doing. Strategies that rely on fast chess colleagues are likely to falter against players who can deflect offenses and get one in the long middle game. Breaking inferior players with chess colleagues in four moves is superficially satisfying, but it does little to make for a better game. He offers one child as an anecdote who has won many games against inferior opposition but who has refused to accept settlement for a long series of victories over clearly inferior players (pp. 36-37). This reminds me of the advice I recently received from a friend: always try to make sure you are the stupidest person in the room so you are always learning. Many of us, however, draw our own value from being large fish in small ponds. Waitzkin's discussions cast chess as an intellectual boxing match, and are especially appropriate 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 had never been in a long fight before. But he won with his doping rope strategy, patiently absorbing Foreman's punches and waiting for Foreman to exhaust himself. His chess lesson is appropriate (p. 34-36) as he talks about promising young players who have 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 the entity and incremental approaches to learning. Entity theorists believe that things are innate; so one can play chess or work or be an economist because that's what he was born to do. Therefore, failure is deeply personal. In contrast, incremental theorists view losses as opportunities: step by step, gradually, a beginner can become a master (p. 30). They rise to the occasion when heavy material is shown to them because their approach is oriented towards mastering something over time. Entity theorists fail under pressure. Waitzkin counters his approach, in which he spent a lot of time dealing with end-of-game strategies where both players had very few pieces. In contrast, he said many young students start by learning a wide range of introductory variations. This damaged their games in the long run: (m)every very talented kid expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a fight, they were emotionally unprepared. For some of us, pressure becomes a source of paralysis and errors are the beginning of a downward spiral (p. 60-62). However, as Waitzkin argues, a different approach is needed if we are to reach our full potential. The fatal flaw of shock-and-awe, blitzkrieg approaches chess, martial arts, and ultimately all that must be learned is that everything can be taught rot. Waitzkin derides martial arts practitioners who become form collectors with fancy punches and twirls that have absolutely no martial value (p. 117). You could say the same thing about the problems of sets. This is not to gain foundation – Waitzkin's focus in Tai Chi was to improve certain fundamental principles (p. 117) – but there is a profound difference between technical knowledge and genuine understanding. Knowing the moves is one thing, but knowing how to determine what to do next is quite another. Waitzkin's intense focus on refined basics and processes meant he remained strong in opponents arrested. His approach to martial arts is summed up in this passage (p. 123): I summed up my body mechanics into a powerful state, while most of my opponents had large, elegant and relatively impractical repertoires. The fact is that when there is intense competition, those who succeed have slightly more honed skills than others. It's rarely a mysterious technique that drives us to the top, but a deep mastery of what can be a basic set of skills. Depth beats the width of any day of the week, as it opens the channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden potential. This is about much more than the smell of blood in water. In Chapter 14, he speaks of the illusion of the mystical, whereby something is so clearly internalized that almost imperceptibly small movements are as incredibly powerful as embodied in this quote by Wu Yu-hsiawi, writing in the nineteenth century: If the opponent does not move, then I do not move. At the slightest stroke of my opponent, I go first. A learning-oriented view of intelligence means with success the association of efforts through the process of teaching and stimulation (p. 32). In other words, genetics and raw talent can only get you so far before hard work has to pick up the adhesion (p. 37). Another useful lesson concerns the use of adversity (p. 132-33). Waitzkin suggests using problems in one area to adapt and strengthen other areas. I have a personal example that can help. I'll always regret leaving basketball in high school. I remember my sorcerer year - my last year playing - I broke my thumb and, instead of focusing on cardiovascular fitness and other aspects of my game (such as working with my left hand), I waited to recover before going back to work. Waitzkin offers another useful chapter called slowing down time in which he discusses ways to sharpen and take advantage of intuition. He talks about the chunking process, which is separating the problem into progressively larger problems until a complex set of calculations is done with the adhesion, without thinking about it. His technical example from chess is particularly easy in the bisnotia on page 143. Chess Grandmaster internalized a lot about parts and scenarios; Grandmaster can process a much larger amount of information with less effort than experts. Mastery is the process of turning the articulate into intuitive. There is much that will be known to people who read books like this, such as the need to pace, set clearly defined goals, the need to relax, techniques to enter the zone and so on. Anecdotes beautifully illustrate his points. During the book, he presents his methodology for entering the zone, another concept that people in performance-based occupations will find useful. He calls it a soft zone (chapter three), and it consists of flexibility, forged and able to adapt to circumstances. Martial artists and David Allen's Getting Things Done could recognize that it has a mind like water. He compares it to a hard zone, which requires a cooperative world for you to function. Like a dry twig, you are brittle, ready to crack under pressure (p. 54). The soft zone is resilient, like flexible grass that can move and survive hurricane winds (p. 54). The second illustration refers to making sandals if one faces a journey through a field of thorns (p. 55). Neither bases success on submissive world or overwhelming power, but on intelligent preparation and cultivated resilience (p. 55). A lot of things will be familiar to creative people here: you're trying to think, but that one song by that one band keeps moving away in your head. Waitzkin's only option was to come to terms with the noise (p. 56). In the language of economics, restrictions are given; We don't choose them. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 16. He talks about top performers, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and others who are not obsessed with the latest failure and who know how to relax when they need to (p. NFL quarterback Jim Harbaugh's 179th experience is useful and as he could have let things go more while the defense was on the field, which was sharper in the next drive (p. Waitzkin talks about further things he learned while experimenting in human performance, especially given cardiovascular interval training, which can have a profound impact on your ability to quickly release tension and recover from mental exhaustion (p. 181). This is the last concept—recover from mental exhaustion—that's probably what most academics need help with. There's a lot here about pushing boundaries; however, the right to do so should be earned: as Waitzkin writes, Jackson Pollock could draw like a camera, but instead decided to spray paint in a wild way that pulsed with emotion (p. 85). This is another good lesson for academics, managers and teachers. Waitzken emphasizes a lot of attention to detail when receiving instruction, especially from his tai chi instructor William C.C. Chen. Tai Chi is not about resisting or being forced, but about the ability to blend in with (adever) energy, give in to it and overcome it with softness (p. 103). The book is full of stories about people who did not reach their potential because they did not take advantage of opportunities for improvement or because they refused to adapt to the conditions. This lesson is emphasized in Chapter 17, where he talks about making sandals when faced with a thorny path, such as an underhanded contestant. The book offers several principles by which we can become better teachers, scientists and managers. Celebrating the outcome should be secondary to celebrating the processes that produced these outcomes (p. 45-47.). There's also a contrast study that starts on page 185, and it's something I've struggled to learn. Waitzkin points to himself on be able to relax between matches while some of his opponents were under pressure 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 highly self-destructive (p. 186). The art of learning has much to teach us regardless of our field. I thought it was especially important given my chosen profession and my decision to start studying martial arts when I started teaching. Insights are numerous and applicable, and the fact that Waitzkin used the principles he is now learning to become a world-class competitor in two very demanding competitive companies makes it much easier to read. I recommend this book to anyone in a leadership position or 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