

1 *The Cocky Son-Of-A-Bitch*



"At home I am a nice guy: but I don't want the world to know. Humble people, I've found, don't get very far."

"It's lack of faith that makes people afraid of meeting challenges, and I believe in myself."

"I am the greatest, I said that even before I knew I was."

"I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me."

—Muhammed Ali

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I once saw a graduate of Harvard Law speak. After the talk, someone from the audience asked how he was able to be so confident when he spoke. The speaker replied, “Before I begin, I think about how much better I am than everyone else in the room....”

A bit arrogant? Possibly. But, it’s more likely what I’d call cockiness.

Cockiness is something different, although it gets a bad reputation because it often gets confused with Arrogance. Cockiness is a mixture of true skill, passion, and directed blindness, and represents a valuable attitude. Arrogance is what happens when Cockiness has no value and thus becomes detrimental. When Cockiness isn’t applied to a craft involving skill and passion, Cockiness becomes Arrogance, which only represents another form of pure ignorance⁸.

⁸ “Another facet of the cockiness-arrogance balance is that cockiness is more of a reflection of confidence, whereas arrogance is more that a person gives themselves an unrealistic

When it comes to performance, you not only need the skill to do the given task, you need to be able to do the skill under extreme pressure. And no one is better prepared for these extreme situations than *the Cocky Son-of-a-Bitch*.

Often times, when people need to perform, their mind is filled and distracted with pitfalls. This is why cockiness is a good thing. Take the example of the wide receiver in a football game. Without the unreasonable confidence so characteristic of the Cocky SOB, before the play starts, a wide receiver may be thinking to himself, “What if I drop the ball? What if the corner pushes me off my route? What if the safety intercepts it? What if?”. Any intelligent person would know these are all possibilities. But by acknowledging them, we make ourselves more vulnerable to them. We stop ourselves from fully investing in the moment.

or untrue amount of credit for success. Cockiness is an attitude towards the future, arrogance is more often an attitude towards the past.” Bryan Hernandez, March 12, 2010 3:30 PM

In order to fully invest all energies and abilities in the moment, The Cocky SOB Persona wields a certain level of blindness in that exact moment; the Cocky SOB simply does not understand flaw, or failure, at the right time. And by dedicating zero concentration to what could go wrong, by being completely blind to failure, the Cocky SOB can focus all his mental and physical efforts to performing, despite the level of pressure or intensity.

And in this light, Cockiness might not sound so bad. But, isn't this merely describing a healthy level of confidence? Isn't that what we really want, a healthy level of confidence? In many circumstances, a healthy level of confidence will suffice, and is therefore preferable over unnecessary cockiness. However, confidence is completely distinct from cockiness.

Confidence is the feeling of control we gain from possessing a combination of skill and experience. We know what is within our means, and if we're good, we can control the outcome. The feeling of resolve and assurance coming from great skill and great experience is powerful. But, confidence is rooted in having prior experience in a

given situation and the feeling of having enough resources to meet the demand. What happens when that is not the case? What happens when uncertainty returns?

Jennifer Brown, a Professor at the Kellogg School of Business, did some data analysis relevant to these very questions in a recent paper entitled *Quitters Never Win: The (Adverse) Incentive Effects of Competing Against Superstars*⁹. Brown studied scores of every PGA tournament from 1999 to 2006. Brown discovered that when Tiger Woods, an undisputed superstar, entered the tournament the other contestants, on average, added .8 strokes to their scores—their performance significantly decreased just by playing in the same tournament as Tiger. And when Tiger was playing well, they did even worse.

Jennifer attributed this reduced performance to the golfers admitting defeat; when the golfers realized they had less of a chance of winning, they didn't try as hard.

I don't buy it.

⁹ Brown, Jennifer. *Quitters Never Win: The (Adverse) Incentive Effects of Competing with Superstars*. 2010. http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/Faculty/Directory/Brown_Jennifer.aspx#research

Pro Golfers are Pro Golfers because they're great competitors. And great competitors want to win. The golfers didn't scale back their efforts, they "choked." Tiger's presence means they need to play a much better game, which increases the pressure. If anything, they tried harder. Their preoccupation with Tiger and the added pressure to perform well knocked them off their usual game.

If you asked any of Tiger's competitors if they were a great golfer and if they were confident in their abilities, they would respond affirmatively. However, when facing a dominant star like Tiger, they aren't as sure of their abilities, they think more about their swing and decisions, and consequently, they have more screw ups.

We are never safe from uncertainty, and we are never safe from fear. And in times of intense circumstance and dire need, if we question ourselves, we lose focus and resources that could be directed towards achieving the goal.

By engaging in directed blindness, the Cocky SOB is always able to fully utilize resources; the Cocky SOB is able to focus only on their own skills and objectives. When playing against Tiger, any rational person would say that they will most likely lose. These facts must be ignored during performance. And with the power of skill, passion, and directed blindness, the Cocky SOB turns a time of intense pressure into an opportunity to achieve his defining moment. Flaw and failure no longer exist. The only outcome is winning.

In his 2005 commencement speech, Steve Jobs ended with an encouraging phrase, “Stay young. Stay foolish.” These words were meant to encourage the students to keep their energetic spirits and shoot for the skies despite what people that “know better” have to say. The naiveté and energy of youth is powerful, and this power comes from a mechanism analogous to cockiness—it is de facto cockiness. If we don’t know very much, we are incapable

of placing undue (or even realistic) constraints on ourselves, and thus create doors of opportunity¹⁰.

Cockiness devolving to Arrogance isn't the only danger for the Cocky SOB. What happens when the Cocky SOB does meet failure? If the Cocky SOB draws its power from delusions, the Cocky SOB will lack resilience—failure equates to destruction of the illusion of victory being the only option. However, if the Cocky SOB does truly have the ability to of *timely* directed blindness, when failure is met the Cocky SOB will be able to face the brutal facts, move on, and know that they met the challenge with resolve and the full force of their being.

Timeliness is key for the Cocky SOB and for all personas. Personas are meant to be “donned” at the right time in the right context. That’s why they exist: so we can correctly react to the current micro-environment.

¹⁰“Or rather, we don't SHUT doors of opportunity by discouraging ourselves with the realistically slim probability of success” –Bryan Hernandez

Cockiness is irrational and partially ignorant. And yet, balanced by skill and timeliness, it is powerful. And when facing a monster, the Cocky SOB knows only victory. And in these tough situations, we have no other choice. We need every ounce of what we have.