



Will I Make It?

It's the spring of 1970; Dave is nearing the end of his (single) year of university. As a first-year student in the Faculty of Music, he is on a general studies program, taking all manner of classes in music theory and history, but he is interested in only one of his courses - flute performance. It's not actually a 'course' of course; simply he visits a flute teacher once a week, and is then left to his own devices to practice and improve.

His flute teacher is not actually on the faculty of the university, which for the most part is made up of theory and history professors. The instrumental instructors are hired from the ranks of professional musicians in town - members of the local symphony orchestra for the most part. Dave's flute instructor is a man by the name of Conrad Crocker, a competent musician from the orchestra, who is very well respected by the musical community. This man has no control over choosing the students, simply each term a fresh batch is assigned to him. Some are taking flute as a secondary instrument, and some - like Dave - have more serious goals. They want to become professional flute players.

Dave's university alone has around a dozen or so flute majors, and if one thinks about the number of music schools all across the continent, each sending a stream of graduates out into the world every year, it is obvious that there is a huge imbalance between the number of practitioners, and the number of jobs available. In truth, most of Mr. Crocker's students have a simple aspiration - they want his job!

It is completely clear to everybody involved - to all the students, and all the working musicians - there will never be enough jobs for everybody. Luck may play a part in finding work, and perhaps one's 'networking' skills may have something to do with it, but over and above all these other factors is the fundamental and immutable basic rule - you have to be good. Not only good; you have to be the best.

Dave has not actually been playing flute all that long; he began playing only about three years before this, when he was fifteen. But his progress has been spectacular. He now holds the principal flute chair in the local youth orchestra, he is the flutist in an award-winning chamber ensemble, and he is clearly the type of student about which people say "Keep an eye on that one; he's going places!"

But there is a fly in the ointment. Dave never practices.

Oh, he spends plenty of time playing flute. He is never without his instrument, and hour after hour each day he plays it. But just 'playing' isn't enough. You have to pick apart a piece of music, determine which parts of it need work, and then work on those parts. Dave never does that. He just plays the pieces he enjoys playing, and skips across the rest. His natural talent has brought him very quickly up to this quite advanced level, but his work habits are now holding him in place.

Mr. Crocker of course knows all about this. Each week he listens as Dave stumbles through the étude that had been assigned the week before, falling in all the predictable places. Mr. Crocker knows about the two different kinds of students - those quickly rising on natural talent to a plateau from which they will never advance - and those with perhaps less natural talent, but who know how to work at something, slow by steady step. He knows which ones to spend all his teaching energies on.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

And one day, near the end of the term, at the end of the weekly lesson, Dave turns to Mr. Crocker to ask a question. As he does, he is saying to himself, "No, don't ask such a thing," but the words come out anyway. "Mr. Crocker, do you think I have what it takes to be a pro flute player? Do you think I'll make it?"

All these years later, Dave can no longer remember just what the teacher replied. Perhaps it was something along the lines of "Well, nobody but yourself can answer that. It's all going to be up to you ...". At least that what most teachers would probably reply.

But Dave didn't need to hear the reply. Even as he asked the question he already knew the answer - the real answer. Artists also know the answer to this question; athletes certainly know the answer. And young musicians should know the answer too. When it comes to the big question "Do I have what it takes?", the answer is very clear. If you have to ask ... the answer is 'no'.

Dave, of course, never became a professional flute player. But all the lessons with Mr. Crocker that year weren't wasted. That final lesson was never forgotten, and years later, when Dave was beginning to chase his dream of becoming a professional woodblock printmaker, he knew what to do ... and what not to do. And definitely ... what not to ask!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>