

Frontrunners; The Combat against the Conventional, and the Breakthrough of Barriers

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*On a dreary Oxford, early summer afternoon, Roger Bannister assumed the starting position. With the ring of the starting pistol he was off, and less than 4 minutes later he had made history.

Roger Bannister, a British neurologist and middle distance runner is credited as the first man to triumph against the formidable 4 minute mile barrier. Whilst the feat in itself is one to be heralded for its sporting significance, its consequences in the fields of cognitive science and psychology proved to be of greater interest and more lasting importance.

More interestingly, Roger Bannister's victory over the impossible led to a sequence of events that we now label as the Bannister Effect, with many of his contemporaries achieving the same previously considered “elusive” accomplishment in the successive weeks of his victory. However, 1954 the year of these unfoldings; can not be credited as a year of significance in the development of middle distance running sports science, technology or training methods and as such a question is raised as to how this golden age of running excellence happened to come about. How was it possible that a standard of human excellence previously viewed as physically impossible was usurped in such an unseemly manner and further; how is it so that it suddenly became so easy? Perhaps some would claim it to be an act of spiritual intervention but rather upon closer analysis it becomes clear that this wondrous time in middle distance running history is a simple consequence of psychology*, or in my phrasing, the luxury of having a front runner.

Roger Bannister, a true eccentric, was often heckled for his unusual training methods. Due to his limited time as an amateur and medical student, he pioneered many new techniques of the discipline, such as periodic interval training*and limited 1 hour practice sessions. Additionally he placed a large emphasis on the visualisation and simulation of race conditions. In doing so, he forged his own path outside of typical convention, ostracising himself from the conventional running community.

The mile, a race of pure grit and determination was held in great reverence amongst its community and in their eyes this Bohemian; being Bannister, did nothing but tarnish the reputation of their beloved event with his unconventionalities. Since 1886, 68 years prior to its eventual conquering, runners had been seriously pursuing the ever further 4 minute mile across Europe, North America and Australia with the greatest minds of the sport and its most promising talents involved in the effort. John Bryant, British journalist and biographer noted “For years milers had been striving against the clock, but the elusive four minutes had always beaten them.”

The four minute mile due to its long lasting unattainable status, ascended to a thing of legend, with mathematicians coupled with the empirical evidence garnered over the course of the careers of expert coaches theorising the exact conditions under which the mark would fall. It was widely theorised that it would need to be a day of perfect weather, exactly 20 degrees Celsius with not a breath of wind, a race run on a hitchless track of hard, dry clay, not to mention the hoard of thousands necessary to will on the runner to the performance of a lifetime. However in a manner of great unseemliness, Bannister completed the feat on an overcast day, on a wet track of cinders in the presence of a relatively shrinkingly small crowd at a meagre Oxford meet hosted at the unimposing Iffley Stadium, a venue that was only capable of supporting 500 spectators.*

Consequently, Roger Bannister, a full time student and iconoclast, didn't fall into the picture as someone capable of achieving this feat. Bannister had little patience for coaches, devising his own system of preparation for the race. His case was not aided by the British press who peddled stories of his "lone wolf" approach, with prospective coaches urging him to adopt a more conventional regimen of training and coaching. But yet, facing all this adversity it was Bannister; an amateur who never progressed to the professional ranks*, despite attaining international success who was to triumph against the odds etching his name into history books.

As such, it is evident that there is great success to be found in the adoption of the unconventional, particularly in its ability to free those trapped as the victims of the Bannister Effect; those who have chosen to adhere strictly to the well beaten path, those who have grown to view their formidable goal as an unattainable dream consequently hindering their ability to act upon their potential for success and stifling their growth.

By straying away from conventional wisdom and forging one's own path a distance is created between the individual and this self crippling mindset, allowing for the accomplishment of the seemingly "impossible". As was the case with Roger Bannister, a man set upon challenging the settled and comfortable beliefs of institutions whose methods of thinking; the supposed "correct" way of doing things and engaging with them, which had yielded nothing but negative and fruitless results over the prior 7 decades.

In committing oneself to the endeavour of forging one's own path; in the pursuit of excellence, adopting the life of an iconoclast, a life committed to challenging the comfortable conventions in everyday practice, a necessary navigation of uncharted territories must take place. This leap, as to be expected, is often daunting, laying the path to a road of great trepidation but is also a necessary step in the conquering of the seemingly unconquerable, as was the case in the great conquest of Roger Bannister.

In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist and philosopher "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." As is the duty of a frontrunner; to pave a path for successors to revolutionise the field in which they excel by triumphing against the impossible, lifting the psychological barriers that inhibit their counterparts from attaining success, irrespective of a possible lack of understanding or compassion in the struggle that it is to set out on an individual conquest, straying away from convention. In other words the necessity for leaders.

In forging one's path and assuming the lonely role of a frontrunner, an absolute willingness to take risks, fail, learn and adapt is necessary. In the path to success; irrespective of the endeavour, it is of the utmost importance that one maintains authenticity to themselves; allowing their values and morality to act as their guide on the lonely road. The necessity of forging one's own path is that the character required to triumph against the heavily stacked odds, will only be found in the self examination and reflection that occurs as a result of adhering to the strict individualism necessary to facilitate success.

Literary minds and philosophers over the course of millennia* have aimed to unpack this thought provoking topic, ranging from Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius with *Meditations*; to modern contemporaries Ayn Rand and her *Atlas Shrugged**, in doing so offering an insight into the necessity of charting one's own path, and the inner tranquillity that can be achieved by consequence of embarking upon such a voyage of solitude.

Marcus Aurelius, famed philosopher and stoic; a Roman Emperor who ruled from 161 to 180 AD, facing some of the greatest betrayals and triumphs of Roman History over the course of his reign including the Roman - Parthian War and Marcomannic Wars writes, "The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way" in his personal journal, *Meditations*, Book 5 Verse 20.

In saying this, Marcus Aurelius illustrates the active choice that we as individuals have in how we perceive the obstacles and challenges that lie ahead of us and how we engage with them. Further to this, he highlights the all consuming nature of whatever obstacle it may be that stands before us, and their ability to not only stifle progress but also to become the sole focus of all our best efforts as we attempt to overcome the challenges that stand between us and our goals. As is the case in the materialisation of the Bannister Effect.

The response to such adversity facilitating the Bannister Effect is one akin to a deer in headlights, a primalistic, rudimentary baseline urge for survival. When faced with a challenge we are presented with two options, "fight or flight". In this case, one must make the active decision to either adhere to convention or forge one's own path, a decision which will dictate the future events and the fashion in which they will occur, our representative "fight or flight" in the unfolding of the Bannister Effect.

In choosing to adhere to convention, one succumbs to the same conventional practices of the way in which tasks of difficulty are viewed; as impossible feats. Consequently a grandiose illusion is constructed regarding the true difficulty of the task limiting future progress and acting as a psychological barrier in the overcoming of obstacles. However, it is in taking a step back and approaching the obstacle from a novel standpoint, only granted following the trekking of an unmarked path, that the way to overcome the aforementioned obstacle becomes clear. Accordingly, Marcus Aurelius highlights the need for us to combat the psychological barriers that may limit us in our ability to overcome the physical challenges that we face, and highlights the importance of outlook and the way in which one perceives the challenges that lie ahead of them in the attainment of their goals..

With this in mind a visible link can be seen between the writings of the great philosopher and the application of the Bannister Effect. In a similar fashion to the one outlined in Aurelius' crucial opening line; relating to the problems that lie in between individuals and their aspirations, with parties having the choice to perceive aforementioned challenges as they please. Those who decide to chart the unbeaten track in search of glory achieve success and overcome the obstacles that stand in their way, as by straying away from convention, they free themselves from the psychological barriers that prevent them from attaining success. Whereas conversely, those who continue to overprescribe to conventional practices view the challenges that lie before them not as opportunities to prevail over the seemingly insurmountable but rather as limiting factors that prevent them from attaining their goals.

Further to this Aurelius notes "The object of life is not to be on the side of the majority, but to escape finding oneself in the ranks of the insane", highlighting the need to take the plunge, defy convention and seek out your own path. However, this message is given further meaning if we look to the well weighted words of Einstein issued almost 2 millennia later in his definition of insanity. Einstein remarks, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

Now what does this mean and how does this relate to the need to break from convention in the pursuit of success as materialised in the Bannister Effect? In overprescribing to convention, individuals feebly attempt to overcome an obstacle which thousands before them have repeatedly attempted, employing

the same measures, yet expecting that somehow they will be the one to clinch the coveted prize, an act of insanity.

It is in straying away from convention and accepting the risk of failure and potential for ridicule that one enables themselves to have the slightest of chances of attaining their goals, highlighting the need to seek success in the unconventional and forge one's own path.

In Ayn Rand's, *Atlas Shrugged*; a 20th century Russian-American philosopher who advocated for adoption of maximum self expression and an absolute commitment to the forging of one's path she writes

However, Robert Frost's *The Road not Taken*, a poem I am certain is familiar to many in attendance, does an excellent job of capturing the sentiment. Frost concludes with the couplet "*I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference*", and all the difference it certainly made in the case of ? who defied all odds in his rise to prominence.

In acknowledgement of the previously argued necessity to forge one's own path and the success that is often achieved through unconventional means, the pitfalls and shortcomings of conventional thinking and the strict adherence to dogmatism, quickly become apparent. In strictly abiding to conventional practice, a significant stunt to the creativity often needed to attain success occurs. As was the case in Roger Bannister's implementation of novel training methods such as his limited 1 hour training sessions born of his necessity to manage his time efficiently as a medical student and amateur athlete.

However a matter of greater importance warranting such innovation is the current overprescription to conventional practices stifling innovation and progress. To return to our reference of *The Road not taken*, Robert Frost encapsulates this idea highlighting that he chose the path that "wanted wear", the same path he accredited as making all the difference. In saying this Robert Frost highlights how in forging his own path and shunning the overprescription to the conventional he rose to prominence.

As a result of the overprescription to the conventional a secondary phenomenon* is observed in which feats of human excellence that typically are deemed as being impossible, oftentimes with ample scientific evidence supporting these claims, tend to be overcome in unseemly manners.

This due to the fact that as these feats have been elevated to pinnacles of excellence unattainable to mere mortals, those who constrict to the conventional practices are paralysed incapable of overcoming them due to the creation of legend that surrounds the accomplishment, leaving the people who operate outside of convention, the people who forge their own path, the frontrunners to be the victors that overcome these imposing challenges.

However, the assumption that these events occur in an unseemly or irrational way is a false narrative. In reality, these events occur as a result of deliberate choices to go against convention, to walk the path less travelled by, allowing the frontrunner to overcome the many psychological barriers to the physical challenges that their conventionalist contemporaries are faced with enabling them to rise in triumph, attaining success.

With the characteristics of a frontrunner and their necessity in the world we live outlined, now I will examine the impact of their successes on their contemporaries.

With the success of a front runner the floodgates are opened for successors to achieve at the equivalent pinnacle of excellence as the initial individual to triumph over the once deemed impossible task. This phenomenon is a materialisation of the Bannister effect, an observation where a mental shift occurs when a significant barrier is broken demonstrating to others that what was once thought of as being unachievable is, in fact, possible.

This is due to a change in the prevailing mentality in populous that once viewed the feat as impossible no longer existing; allowing for the mental shift in the perception of the goal which is necessary for success to take place. In times following the initial triumph waves of similar occurrences often follow as was the case in May of 1954 when Roger Bannister, who conquered the previously deemed impossible mile time of 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds was followed in close succession by contemporary John Landy an Australian Runner who broke the 4 minute barrier 46 days after Roger Bannister's victory, following numerous failed attempts*. Further to his initial triumph against the impossible, Landy went on to best Roger Bannister, breaking the barrier again at a later time with a time of 3 minutes and 58 seconds clinching the fastest mile time in recorded history at the time.

Roger Bannister a frontrunner who forged his own path, a man capable of inspiring an entire generation of running talent, influenced a paradigm shift in the field of running excellence with the once coveted and illustrious 4 minute barrier which seemed to be ever out of reach, being reduced to a regularity amongst top competitors in the years following his victory. In the time since Roger Bannister, thousands of runners, amateurs and professionals have gone on to seize the glory of the once “impossible” feat.

Roger Bannister in acting as a frontrunner, proved to be of great influence to his discipline acting as the nucleus for widespread change within the field. So much so that within one year of his tide-changing win, 3 runners broke the 4 minute barrier in a single race, revolutionising the sport for years to come.

The Bannister effect occurs as a result of a goal being perceived as being of greater legitimacy, due to its tangibility as a result of previous successes; enabling the goal to be viewed as attainable and therefore capable of being acted upon. The Bannister effect operates in accordance with the adage, “seeing is believing” and raises a number of questions surrounding the psychological barriers of physical challenges.

As such it is clear that in order to clinch success, ample addressal of the psychological barriers that stand in our ways is necessary as oftentimes they are capable of outweighing the physical challenges that we see before us, limiting our ability to address such physical challenges and acting as a barrier hindering potential success.

The great luxury of having a frontrunner is the alleviation of the psychological disbelief that prevents the attainment of success, as what is deemed as impossible is actively being witnessed as it unfolds; allowing successors that would otherwise be incapable of surmounting the challenges that stand ahead of them to simply focus on the physical barriers standing in their way. A reality which provides evidence for the existence of the Bannister effect, and highlights the significance of the psychological aspect of challenges.

Conversely on the side of the frontrunner, he who is daring and brilliant enough to defy convention and boldly venture into the unknown, is awaited by a land of great promise and opportunity. Although the path to slaying the dragon that is the supposed “impossible” can often be a treacherous and arduous journey; by seeking out the unconventional and choosing the path less travelled by, their is great success to be found.

In assuming the role of a frontrunner, one offers themselves to their endeavour whole heartedly investing themselves in their entirety to the cause. In doing so, they act as the champions of their field of interest, combatting common convention in the pursuit of achieving the pinnacle of excellence and breaking down barriers. As a frontrunner ,an innovator, a revolutionary and most importantly a leader by actions; one embraces the necessary sacrifices to achieve success, laying the foundation for subsequent individuals to follow.

In examining the stories of individuals such as Roger Bannister, people who defied convention in the pursuit of their goals, there is a great deal of knowledge to be distilled and appreciated. Fundamentally, the Bannister Effect highlights the necessity for leaders to exist amongst us, those who will act as frontrunners, as trail blazers, sometimes at their own personal loss; revolutionising their fields as they lift the psychological barriers acting as a hindrance to the success of their peers.

In committing oneself to the struggle that is rejecting convention and embracing the unconventional, one enables themselves to achieve their goals and attain success, shaking themselves free of the psychological pressures and stresses preventing them from doing such.

In conforming to conventional practices and engaging in the necessary suppression of individualism to do so, one falls victim to the pernicious Bannister Effect stifling their ability to accomplish what they are truly capable of as they fall victim to the psychological barriers that they have placed before themselves.

Consequently a frontrunner commits themselves to the combat of the conventional and breakthrough of barriers.