The Curse of the Ordinary – Oikawa Toru (Haikyuu!!)

It’s a generally accepted notion that every single person in this world has a “thing.” That one talent that comes easily to them and that they just have a knack for. Whether it be out of comfort, idealism, or, hopefully, realism, most people believe this to be an inherent skill that can be brought to the person’s consciousness through experience and exposure to different things. But there is a sad flip side to this as well - what if someone cannot find that thing? To specify further, what if we do not have a skill in an area where we desperately wish we did?

A painful fact of existence is that quite often, our passions do not tend to coincide with things that we are naturally good at. In every field or walk of life, there is often a limit to how good one can get at something no matter how hard they work if they don’t have an aptitude for it. This is truer than ever when it comes to sport, where the distinction between prodigies who were born for this and everyone else is so clear. Exceptional work ethic is a gift in and of itself, but sometimes it is not enough for one’s goals. Now, don’t get me wrong - there are countless professional athletes who are “ordinary” for lack of a better term, and through intelligence, graft and help, go on to be terrific in their respective sports and have an extremely successful career. It’s not that these individuals don’t have talent. But if these people have the loftiest of ambitions - for instance, to be the best, or to be better than someone who has that gift - they are destined to be disappointed.

This is unsurprisingly a theme that has been tackled in sports anime to varying degrees and it’s easy to see why given how hard hitting and relatable an idea it is. And a great example of this is Haikyuu’s Oikawa Toru. A player who polishes his craft to the nth degree, but somehow inevitably sees himself falling short in comparison to his rivals.

Oikawa, is introduced to the story in a very bold fashion. The louder elements of his character are presented first - his pompous attitude, his pettiness, his immaturity, and most importantly, his serious passion for volleyball. He is first displayed as a pretty basic obstacle - a shallow rival for Kageyama, an unlikeable, very skilled antagonist to root against. He seems functional, but nothing more. However, as the layers are peeled back and subtlety fills in the gaps of his outward persona, the facade fades and we can see a young man who is not only a brilliant foil to Hinata and especially Kageyama, but someone who is psychologically tortured by the curse of the ordinary. He is simply not an extraordinary talent. And he so wishes he was.

The most telling trait of Oikawa is his pride. His ambition is grand but simple – to be the best setter possible. To aim for and reach the very top, to defeat Ushijima and go to nationals and further. But along with his pride, another prevailing characteristic is his intelligence. He has a terrific understanding of volleyball and he can sense others who have an innate gift for it. Ushijima is one person with this gift, and Oikawa resents the unfairness of it all. Why should some people be granted this talent when he works so hard and cannot reach their peak? This leads to a severe inferiority complex and a jealousy of those geniuses who have the gift, and unfortunately, this is part of what defines his career as an athlete.

A crushing defeat to Ushijima’s Shiratorizawa team and the pressure of a blossoming young Kageyama creeping up on him increase the pressure on Oikawa and he nearly cracks under the burden of expectation and envy. But Iwaizumi tells him exactly what he needs to hear – that he’s trying to hard to be all alone in this.

“The team with the best six players is the best, not the team with the best player. OR QUOTE E22 18 mins.”

And this is what shifted things for Oikawa, what turned his desperation into resolution and maturity. He trains himself to become the ideal setter and as good as he can will himself to be – merging seamlessly with all manner of players, detecting habits and preferences of other people to optimize his performance. He becomes a dream to play alongside.

(S2E14 - 6-7 mins)

This change of mindset gives Oikawa fresh determination and a willingness to work as hard as possible and do as much as he can to become great, but he is never under any illusion that he will ever be able to reach Ushijima’s talent from an individual standpoint, nor that he will remain superior to Kageyama forever. Because Kageyama is one of the chosen few. The sad thing about Oikawa is that the majority of his time in his story is him fighting against the tide, trying to prevent the inevitable. He is able to bring the absolute best out of any team, and that would seem like the highest possible praise for a setter. But that isn’t so, because he is limited by the highest level of his teammates. Others, certain rare gifted players, can bring out more than maximum out of their teammates they can make their teammates BETTER. And that is the fine line that separates the elite from the aspiring.

Oikawa - Episode 22 - imagery - red eyes. Ill will.

Even after Seijoh defeats Karasuno, he cannot properly celebrate because he is under no illusions OF HIS POSITION.

Episode 24 - “You may be better than me soon, Kageyama.”

In the aftermath of the game, the look on Oikawa’s face as he walks away from his fallen opponents is not one of joy, but resigned relief that he has been able to keep those that will undoubtedly surpass him at bay.. for now. He does not feel true happiness at these victories because he knows sooner or later that kageyama will eclipse him. That there is only so far that his dedication will take him since he doesn’t have the gift. And it tears him apart. But he still tries, with all his might.

“S2E24 – you can only complain once you’ve stopped trying.”

“Talent is something you make bloom – instinct is something you polish.”

This isn’t to say that Kageyama doesn’t work hard - him and Oikawa probably trained a similar amount. But given that amount of training, he was always destined to eventually surpass him as he and Karasuno do when they defeat Seijoh in their rematch. But the silver lining for Oikawa is the mantra that the story has been touting from episode and chapter 1 – that volleyball is a team sport. He may not be a genius, but practice, hard work, strategy and bonds with his teammates are not only fulfilling and worthwhile, but capable of being enough to lead one to glory, as difficult as it may be. As Ushijima chastises him for sticking with an inferior team when Shiratorizawa would have been a better outlet for his talents, Oikawa doesn’t necessarily disagree, but he voices that he doesn’t regret it for a second. These years in high school may not have brought him glory, but they have shown him how to make the most of his tools. And more importantly, they’ve fueled his larger-than-life ambitions to push him onward in his journey. Ever the underdog, he will continue to fight with all he has to defy this unfairness.

“S2E25 – 8-9 minutes – don’t you ever forget my worthless pride.”

Oikawa was indeed special in his own way. He was a level above his peers - having refined his craft to an efficient, beautiful art - a marvel of technique. But that’s the furthest that his blood, sweat and tears could get him. Because in the biggest, tightest games, the ones between great teams, the ones that decide championships and dictate futures – that talent that is untouchable for Oikawa and those moments of transcendent brilliance are often the deciding factor. It certainly was against Shiratorizawa, and while there was a bit of luck involved in Seijoh’s defeat to Karasuno, he was resigned to losing to his rival sooner or later. And no sports anime worth its salt that details the journey of prodigious talents can truly be complete without exploring the harsher flip side of that to add layers to what some would wrongly say are shallow power fantasies.

Hard work does not always beat talent. Sometimes, it doesn’t even equal talent. People learn, move on and accept these things because they have to, but the pain can be agonizing when they realize that they’re just not extraordinary. However, that does not mean that they have to give up pursuing their passion and that does not mean that they will always lose to greater talents. Because that’s not always how sport works. It just means that they have to temper their ambitions a bit, accept their limitations.. and go again. Of course, it will be more difficult for them than it is for those more gifted, but that is the curse of the ordinary. Many thanks for watching.