

“ Road Podcast ”
How Valuable Is
Enthusiasm?



How Valuable Is Enthusiasm?

DUBNER: *Life is hard. Let me just try to scratch my way forward.*

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DUCKWORTH: *I'm Angela DUCKWORTH.*

DUBNER: *I'm Stephen DUBNER.*

DUCKWORTH + DUBNER: *And you're listening to No Stupid Questions.*

Today on the show: Is enthusiasm the real secret to success?

DUCKWORTH: *I'm hearing zest. I'm hearing flow. I feel like I'm tasting a wine now. There are hints of oak!*

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DUBNER: *Angela, I have a question that's both a problem and a solution.*

DUCKWORTH: *A puzzle, wrapped in
enigma, covered with mystery.*

DUBNER: *So, I've been preparing for a golf
competition that's coming up in California.*

*There is a thing in golf called a pro-am,
which is attached to a professional
tournament. The day — or two or three
days — before it, there is a competition
where one pro will play with a few
amateurs. And the one I'm playing in is a
little bit different. It's a collegiate
challenge, where there are college players.*

*So, there'll be a foursome with the best
college player from a given program, a pro
that they'll be matched up with, and then
two alumni of that institution. I'm playing*

as an alum with a Columbia golfer, and another Columbia alum, and a pro. And my performance matters almost zero, unless we win — which would give some scholarship money to the college. The chances of winning are very slim, but I want to do well.

DUCKWORTH: *You're competitive.*

DUBNER: *I guess I am competitive. And, also, I'm competitive with myself. I like improving.*

DUCKWORTH: *Competitive doesn't necessarily mean "beating other people," but you're a striver.*

DUBNER: *So, I've been trying to prepare for this match both physically — which is*

hard in New York City, because it's cold, you can't get outside and play — and prepare mentally. So, mentally one thing I'm really focused on is not choking. To do so, I've been reading a book by Gary Player, who's one of the best golfers in history. He's in his mid-80s now. And this book he wrote some years ago is called, quite directly, Don't Choke: A Champion's Guide to Winning Under Pressure. So, I've been reading this, and I can't say that I've learned all that much about choking. The book is not really about choking. It's more of a manual for how Gary Player approached the game, generally. He was known for being very strong mentally and

for pursuing physical fitness at a much higher level than anyone of his era. So, he writes about these aspects of his game. He would practice, and practice, and practice.

He'd get up at five in the morning in a strange town to go find a gym to lift weights. He accepted and really wrestled with the mental challenges, and wrestled with choking.

DUCKWORTH: *Like Michael Jordan or Tom Brady, right? Like, the mental game in addition to the game-game.*

DUBNER: *Exactly. But here's what really struck me. It wasn't about choking. What struck me is that, in all these avenues that he's pursuing — the training, the strategy,*

the physical fitness — there was one word that came up over, and over, and over again, that seemed to underlie everything Gary Player did. And that word is “enthusiasm.”

DUCKWORTH: *Enthusiasm.*

DUBNER: *And it surprised me, because that’s not a word that we typically think about in terms of a championship ingredient. He acknowledges that he’s always been one of the most enthusiastic people alive. And his argument is: that’s what has allowed him to work so hard and succeed. So, my question for you is this: Do you agree that enthusiasm is a foundational ingredient of success? And if*

you do, what's your best advice to increase one's enthusiasm, especially if it's not as naturally sky-high as Gary Player's, or maybe even yours?

DUCKWORTH: *I love this question, but I wonder whether Gary Player means enthusiasm as in “energy” — he's just, like, a bunny rabbit, doesn't sleep a lot. Is that the gift that he's talking about?*

DUBNER: *I would say no. I think his enthusiasm is defined as — here: I'll read you a little bit.*

DUCKWORTH: *Please.*

DUBNER: *“I had brainwashed myself to be enthusiastic about everything good in my game and to keep building my own*

confidence. That enthusiasm is what carried me from the golf course to the gym, to keep working hard at getting better. Focus 100 percent on what you are busy with, immerse yourself in it, and do it with enthusiasm.”

DUCKWORTH: *Okay. So, now it’s not just that he has, like, superhuman energy — because, by the way, that has also been posited by some to be a predictor of success. Like, Teddy Roosevelt, famously: prodigious amounts of energy. But that’s not what Gary Player is talking about. When he talks about enthusiasm, does he mean that 100 percent — or close to that — of whatever energy you do have is*

directed like a laser beam on what you're doing? I mean, if you imagine that a person— This is not easy to imagine, but imagine that a person is a set of arrows.

DUBNER: *A person is a set of arrows?*

DUCKWORTH: *I know. It's a bit of a stretch, but stay with me. So, when you have goal conflict, it's like you have an arrow pulling you in one direction, but you have an arrow pulling you in another direction. It's like: I kind of want to eat the Häagen-Dazs; I kind of really feel like I am going to get sick and then regret that. That's conflict. I think that dilutes your focus. I think what Gary Player's talking about is, like, all your arrows are pointing the same direction,*

and it's what you're doing. In other words, like, "I'm putting. I'm not thinking about dinner. I'm not thinking about other people watching me putt. I'm just putting." Is that what he means?

DUBNER: *I think the way he defines it, enthusiasm is a mental construct that allows him to focus his mind and body on the goal at hand, even when he doesn't feel like it.*

DUCKWORTH: *Oh, like willpower.*

DUBNER: *Well, when I think about willpower, I think that's a little bit closer to a form of martyrdom. In other words, it's maybe the unsmiling version of enthusiasm. I think of enthusiasm as the*

happy version of willpower. Like, “Yeah, I can’t wait to get on with this task! Once I’m onto this task, I cannot wait to engage with it every moment that I’m in it and focus on it. And furthermore, as soon as I’m done with this task, I can’t wait to get onto the next task!” And that, you could call willpower, but the way he describes it, it’s a very exuberant form of willpower.

DUCKWORTH: Right.

DUBNER: Is there a word from psychology that’s close? What about “vitality”?

DUCKWORTH: There are scientists who study vitality, or sometimes it’s called “zest.” If I were interviewing Gary, I would ask him to complete the “zest scale.”

DUBNER: *It's not called the "zest test"? That would make so much more sense.*

DUCKWORTH: *That would be so good! Maybe the "best zest test"?*

DUBNER: *And also, there'd be an "east" version, and then there would be a "west" version of the "best zest test."*

DUCKWORTH: *Yes. That's right. Okay. So, this is actually one of 24 tests in the V.I.A., which is the Values in Action Inventory — these are 24 strengths of character that cultures around the world seem to find admirable. And so it's like: self-control, and humility, and sense of humor, appreciation of beauty. So, I'm going to ask you to stand in for Gary Player. And I'm going to ask you*

to answer on a scale from one to five — where five is very much like Gary, and one is very much unlike Gary.

DUBNER: Got it.

DUCKWORTH: Here you go: “I want to fully participate in life, not just view it from the sidelines.”

DUBNER: Five-and-a-half.

DUCKWORTH: “I love what I do.”

DUBNER: Five-and-a-half.

DUCKWORTH: “I look forward to each new day.”

DUBNER: 1,600.

DUCKWORTH: Wow, you really are zesty.

DUBNER: Not so good with number scales, but very zesty.

DUCKWORTH: *"I have lots of energy."*

DUBNER: *Yeah, five. Until you hear from me again, it's five.*

DUCKWORTH: *Just assume it's five to five-and-a-half.*

DUBNER: *But keep going.*

DUCKWORTH: *"I can hardly wait to see what life has in store for me in the weeks and years ahead."*

DUBNER: *Five.*

DUCKWORTH: *I'm going to read you two more. "I awaken with a sense of excitement about the day's possibilities."*

DUBNER: *Five.*

DUCKWORTH: *"People describe me as full of zest."*

DUBNER: *Yep. I have to say, it's really boring being this enthusiastic.*

DUCKWORTH: *Kind of one-note there. But I do think when Gary Player says "enthusiasm," I'm hearing notes of zest. I'm also hearing notes of flow. "Flow" is like complete attentional absorption in the task at hand. It's completely all-in. Like, when I am doing it, I am only doing this. And I think that what zest and flow have in common is: when you are in the flow state, it is zest-like in that you feel really alive. Did you ever watch "Dear Basketball," the animated short that Kobe Bryant — I think he wrote it.*

DUBNER: *I did not. I haven't even heard of it. And now I feel lesser for not having heard of it.*

DUCKWORTH: *Oh, it's so good. It's his story about growing up as a little boy, and then falling in love with basketball. And it's kind of like a love letter to basketball. And then, of course, Kobe Bryant died tragically not long after winning the Oscar for that. One of the lines that I'll never forget is, like, he says, "You made me feel so alive." That is exactly how high performers describe being in the flow state. It's like you are kind of, like, 20 percent more alive. So, I'm hearing— I'm hearing zest. I'm hearing flow. I feel like I'm tasting a wine now.*

There are hints of oak! I think, it's probably both of those, in part because when people are really great at what they do — they probably have, especially for a physical sport, a ton of energy. And that energy gets directed. I mean, think about a really powerful laser, right? What a laser beam is, is when all the waves of light are, like, focused. Gary Player probably had a lot of focus, a lot of zest, and the ability to concentrate his attention and achieve the flow state. And that's a pretty happy way to live life.

DUBNER: *Angie, can you talk for a moment about what may be a very fine line between “enthusiasm” as Gary Player*

writes about it and obsession? Because it would also be easy to call him obsessed with golf, but obsession carries a pejorative layer, which I think we would use if he had not been successful. But because he was very successful, we tend to dismiss that association with obsession, even if he clearly was. So, are those two sides of the same coin? Are they the same side of a coin?

DUCKWORTH: *There is a researcher I admire a lot. His name is Robert Vallerand. And I apologize. It's French. So, you know — "Robert Vallerand." But anyway, Robert Vallerand studies obsession, and he studies passion. He would argue that a passion*

can be obsessive, or it can be harmonious. And an “obsessive” passion is one where it’s involuntary. It’s also externally motivated, as opposed to internally motivated. So, you feel a little bit like the object of the sentence instead of the subject of the sentence. The flip side of that is harmonious passion. And that’s where you feel like it’s integrated into your life. It’s something that you’re pursuing for intrinsic reasons, not extrinsic reasons. And generally what Vallerand finds is that a harmonious passion is good and correlates with good stuff — including the kind of practice that makes people better, like deliberate practice, et cetera. And

obsessive passion tends to be not as strongly correlated — in some cases negatively correlated — with positive outcomes. I think the lesson is that it's not enough to say, like, "Oh, complete absorption in what you're doing." There can be a sort of wrong way to do that, which is to get yourself into things where it begins to feel involuntary. And when I think of the gritty people that I studied, the gritty high-performers, they are obsessed, but it is a voluntary obsession.

Still to come on *No Stupid Questions*:
Stephen wonders if there's a life hack that can make him zestier.

DUBNER: *All I have to do is be like him, and I too will become a championship golfer.*

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Before we return to Stephen and Angela's conversation about enthusiasm, let's hear some of your thoughts on the topic. We asked listeners to send us voice memos about the zestiest people in history. Here's what you said:

Andrew DOUGLAS: Hello, NSQ. This is Andrew. I'm currently in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and because of all the French influence here, I'm reminded of my favorite historical figure, Napoleon Bonaparte. He was a man of seemingly endless energy. He was a polymath. Pretty much good at

everything. So, if you're talking about vitality and zeal, I can't think of anybody that matches that description better than Napoleon. People talk a lot about his conquests, but he was very well-liked in France. And he died young at the age of 51. But he lived more than anybody.

Shay ANDERSEN: When I think of zest, I immediately think of Dolly Parton. She's a true Renaissance woman that's found success in multiple industries. She's a musician, an actress, a business owner, and a philanthropist. I mean, it's possible to write an entire book about her accomplishments, but she has such a dynamic, lively presence, and I hope to

*have even a small percentage of her zeal
for life.*

*Alex BARBAG: When I think of the zestiest
people throughout history, I think
Spongebob Squarepants. Anyone who goes
to work every day with a smile on his face,
especially when it's flipping burgers — I
mean crabby patties — that's a zesty
person. Anyone whose favorite activity is
catching jellyfish, that's a zesty person.
Anyone who can play his nose like the flute,
that's zesty person. He also lives in a
pineapple, which is a pretty zesty thing to
do.*

That was, respectively: Andrew Douglas,
Shay Andersen, and Alex Barbag. Thanks to

them, and to everyone who sent us their thoughts. Now, back to Stephen and Angela's conversation about how to harness Gary Player's unique enthusiasm.

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DUBNER: *So, Gary Player — the way he defines it, enthusiasm is a force. And he actually describes it as ingrained — a hereditary trait — which, I have a hard time believing that's true. I'm curious to know if you know anything about that.*

DUCKWORTH: *I think everything's hereditary.*

DUBNER: *Well, everything's some portion hereditary,*

DUCKWORTH: *Exactly. I don't think there's anything that doesn't have some genetic influence.*

DUBNER: *So, here's an interesting conflict, or potential conflict. In the case of this one particular person, Gary Player, he grew up in South Africa. He had a hard and relatively low-income childhood. He's white. So, he had that going for him in that country at that time. But he had a lot of struggles. His mother died when he was very young. His father did hard, physical, manual labor; he worked in a gold mine. And he had kind of a hardscrabble life. Do you think that his high enthusiasm level, which he professes to have had from*

childhood, in a case like that, is a coping mechanism to some degree? Or do you think it really was a trait that he just owned?

DUCKWORTH: *I said that I think everything has some genetic influence, and I stand by that. At the same time, you could argue that everything is shaped by the environment. And those aren't contradictory statements, because they're both true. You know, there's a theory of personality that I like a lot. And it sounds kind of Freudian, almost. But I'm thinking of Tim Beck, the great psychotherapist. He said that personality is an adaptation to the environment that you develop, and*

then, basically, is rewarded. And then, you lean more into it. Say, for example, you're a very anxious person. Well, that's an adaptation to an environment that you perceive as threatening. So, you start to think about the future. You try to avoid bad futures, and carefully rethink all your decisions, and so forth. That's maybe an anxious personality type, but he would say it's an adaptation. And I think he would say that, when it becomes dysfunctional — when it's not serving you, or it's too rigid — then it's a maladaptation, and then you go into the realm of psychopathology. But all personality, including healthy personalities, are just adaptations to

experience. So, maybe Gary Player had a kind of unstable childhood or adversity — that enthusiasm ended up being a kind of coping mechanism or an adaptation that served him. Freud had the same view. Freud thought of almost all behavior as being coping mechanisms. So, anyway, I think it could be that childhood experiences made him more enthusiastic.

DUBNER: *But my natural intuition would suggest that the opposite would have happened — that with all those difficulties, one would, rather than promote this self-belief in, like, “I can get to the next stage,” one would say, “Wow, life is hard. Let me just try to scratch my way forward, as*

opposed to setting a very high goal.” Now, he might be a terrible example, Gary Player, because he’s plainly an outlier. He’s literally one of the best golfers in history. And he came from a place where very little conspired to make him that. You know, Jack Nicklaus, one of the other greatest golfers, he grew up the son of a wealthy businessman in Columbus, Ohio — belonged to a country club, played golf and other sports. The path was kind of paved for him. Arnold Palmer, another of the greatest golfers, I believe his dad was the pro, or ran, again, a golf club. So, it was a different trajectory for him. And all of this may be post-hoc reasoning to help

explain why this outlier did so well. But I'm still just incredibly attracted to this notion of — if nothing else — his belief that enthusiasm is at the root of all his success. And therefore, he's become an evangelist for all of us to, quote, "be more enthusiastic." And I have no idea if that's a good idea or not. Because if enthusiasm as he describes it is largely hereditary — well, I can't change my genes. If enthusiasm is the product of your own individual life — well, I can't live the life he's lived, and so on. But I guess what I really would like to know from you is: are there any empirical findings suggesting that there are ways to

*increase one's blank — call it enthusiasm,
call it zest, et cetera?*

DUCKWORTH: *Even though probably Gary did, I'm guessing, inherit genes that inclined him that way, there is one thing I think we can do that would incline us to have more zest and more flow. And that is to find things that fit. So, there's a lot of research on how our interests can either fit well with what we're doing, or misfit. Like, I read a whole book on resilience yesterday. I was on cloud nine. I was like, "This is amazing. I love this book. I don't want to go to the bathroom. I don't want to answer the phone. All I want to do is read this book." I think I was in the flow state. If you*

made me read about Russia — like, I don't know anything about Russia. I didn't know that Russia was threatening to invade Ukraine. I'm like, "Really? Where's Ukraine?"

DUBNER: *So, fit is necessary to generate zest.*

DUCKWORTH: *It's so important. And you can say, like, "I don't have the God-given gift of flow or zest." But the more you can make your environment fit your personality — like, Tim Beck said that personality is an adaptation to our environment, but also, if we can find environments that are well suited for our personalities, then we've got something close to flow.*

DUBNER: *I really want to know whether zest is contagious. Because if we think about leadership — whether leadership is in a corporate setting, political setting, in a family setting, and so on — we do rely a lot on transmission of values and transmission of mood. You know, we model behavior. And so I'm curious: If I want to be zestier — or have more vitality, or enthusiasm, whatever we're calling it — is one way to gain more simply by being more selective in the people and circumstances —?*

DUCKWORTH: *Like, hang out with enthusiastic people?*

DUBNER: *Let me find the zesty people!*

DUCKWORTH: *I think so. And that's because there's research on emotional contagion. I'm thinking about Sigal Barsade, who's a very good friend and an organizational behavior scientist. She studies the ripple effects of emotion. Like, you come to work, you're kind of in a foul mood, you interact with a person — well, guess what? They're more inclined to get into a bit of a foul mood themselves. And then, they go and interact with two more people. It happens on the positive side as well. Like, you come into work, and you just got a little extra spring in your step, and you're smiling, and you're complimenting people. And then, they go and interact with*

two other people. So, we know that emotions are contagious. And I think the idea of, like, “Hey, I just want to have a little more enthusiasm, a little more zest, a little more flow in my life. Maybe I’ll go hang out with those people who seem to be that way,” I think it’s great advice.

DUBNER: *So, how would you advise me? Because I started on this little journey — trying to not choke in a competition that’s coming up. And during the course of that journey, I kind of forgot about choking and got obsessed with enthusiasm. But I don’t know now how to harness this finding, because if I were to listen to Gary Player, I might come away with the thought that all*

I have to do is be like him, and I too will become a championship golfer. Well, I'm realistic enough to know that's not the case. So, then I have to be a little bit suspect about the actual value and leverage that this enthusiasm, or zest, is providing. Should I think, "You know what?

Zest is a really useful mechanism to produce potentially more flow, more productivity, more happiness, and so on.

And even if I need to generate that zest somehow — maybe by hanging out with zestier folk than I, like an Angela

DUCKWORTH — *that I should do that in the hopes that it will increase my actual performance.*

DUCKWORTH: *Well, what do you want, Stephen?*

DUBNER: *In this small case of this one golf outing, I want to perform to the best of my ability. In other words, if I play as well as I'm capable of playing, given there will be bad shots — there just are in golf — and we come in, whatever, 25th out of 25 teams, but I played as well as I am capable, I think I'll come away with some satisfaction. If, however, I perform poorly because of the pressure, then I'll be really unhappy. So, I've been trying to make a sort of end-run around the fear of choking and go straight to enthusiasm, thinking*

maybe that will supersede. So, that's what I want.

DUCKWORTH: *Okay, well then here's a little advice on behalf of Mike Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who coined the term "flow." And I said that the flow state is the state of complete absorption in the task at hand. That's true. But there was another element of flow that bears mentioning in that it is typically autotelic. So, what does autotelic mean?*

DUBNER: *You need to spell and define, please.*

DUCKWORTH: *Oh. This is like the spelling bee. Autotelic. A-U-T-O-T-E-L-I-C. Autotelic. And I can define it, which you don't have to*

do in the spelling bee. It basically means “intrinsically motivated.” Like, “the end is itself.” The “telos,” the terminus, the purpose of the activity, is itself. You’re doing it for its own sake. Stephen, you are not there to win prizes. You are not there to impress anyone. You are there to play golf. That will, I think, be the kind of self-talk that gets you more into the flow state than the kind of, like, “Oh, I think that person probably thinks I’m not as good as the college student on this.” Anyway, I think it’s good advice for life, right?

DUBNER: *Can we just say: I am definitely not as good as the college student. The college student is a great golfer.*

DUCKWORTH: *I was wondering that. I was like, “Oh, how do the college students play into this?”*

DUBNER: *They’re really, really, really good. And many of these college students will be P.G.A. Tour golfers in a few years.*

DUCKWORTH: *So, this is the thing. You may not get the best score. You likely won’t. You already know that. But you can achieve the flow state, because the flow state also is not actually dependent on winning. It’s just complete absorption at the task at hand when challenges and skills are well-matched and you’re doing a thing that you find to be intrinsically rewarding. You are doing it for its own sake.*

DUBNER: *I wrote all that down. I'm going to tuck it inside my golf cap.*

DUCKWORTH: *I should charge you for that. That was good.*

DUBNER: *And before every shot, I'm going to read that little dissertation. And then, I will be penalized for slow play, and I will probably be disqualified. And if I do choke—*

DUCKWORTH: *It's my fault.*

DUBNER: *I'll know it's not because I wasn't being autotelic, because I will be autotelic. No Stupid Questions is produced by me, Rebecca Lee Douglas. And now here's a fact-check of today's conversation.*

In the first half of the show, Stephen explains that he came across Gary Player's book while searching for a way to prevent choking during an upcoming golf competition. In episode 341 of *Freakonomics Radio*, Stephen actually interviewed an expert in why we choke under pressure: cognitive scientist and Barnard College President Sian Beilock. One of Beilock's primary pieces of advice is to "inoculate yourself against high pressure conditions" by practicing under conditions similar to those you'll perform under." For example, if you're worried about choking during an upcoming wedding toast, first practice with people watching you. We'll

link to the episode in our show notes
— just in case you're competing against
Stephen and you need a leg up now that
he has a hack to the flow state.

Later, Stephen says that he thinks that
legendary golfer Arnold Palmer had a
father who either ran a golf club or played
the sport professionally. In actuality,
Palmer's father had a much less imposing
career — “Deacon” Palmer was a
superintendent, or the “greenskeeper,” at
a country club in Latrobe, Pennsylvania —
a job which did, in fact, allow Arnold
Palmer access to the course at a young
age.

Also, Angela misquotes Kobe Bryant in the Oscar-winning animated short, “Dear Basketball.” She remembers the quote as, “You made me feel so alive.” However, the real quote is as follows: “I played through the sweat and hurt. Not because challenge called me, but because YOU called me. I did everything for YOU, because that’s what you do when someone makes you feel as alive as you’ve made me feel.” Finally, Angela references the work of her friend, University of Pennsylvania professor Sigal Barsade, on emotional contagion. Some sad news to report — Barsade died shortly after this episode was recorded at age 56 of a brain tumor.

We'll link to her *New York Times* obituary
in the show notes.

That's it for the fact-check.

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Coming up next week on *No Stupid Questions*: Stephen and Angela compare the data on American satisfaction with the direction of our country to satisfaction with our personal lives.

DUCKWORTH: *Oh, my life? You're asking about my life? "Oh, pretty great." How's the United States doing? "Oh, terrible."*
That's next week on *No Stupid Questions*.

For that episode, we want you to let us know: at what point in your life did the direction of the country seem to affect

your personal life the most? To share your thoughts, send a voice memo to NSQ@Freakonomics.com with the subject line “My Country, My Happiness.” Make sure to record someplace quiet, and please keep your thoughts to under a minute. Maybe we’ll include them on the show!

No Stupid Questions is part of the Freakonomics Radio Network, which also includes *Freakonomics Radio*, *People I (Mostly) Admire*, and *Freakonomics, M.D.* All our shows are produced by Stitcher and Renbud Radio. This show was mixed by Eleanor Osborne. Our staff also includes Alison Craiglow, Greg Rippin,

Gabriel Roth, Morgan Levey, Zack Lapinski,
Julie Kanfer , Mary Diduch, Ryan Kelley,
Jasmin Klinger, Emma Tyrell, Lyric Bowdich,
Jacob Clemente, and Alina Kulman. Our
theme song is “And She Was” by Talking
Heads — special thanks to David Byrne and
Warner Chappell Music. If you’d like to
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Freakonomics.com/NSQ. Thanks for
listening!

DUCKWORTH: *You cannot play that, Rebecca. You cannot play that even as a blooper.*

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