

Competition (Part 1)—the Struggle for Excellence or Victory?

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Recommended Readings

[The Effects of External Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation](#)

[The Effects of External Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation - Practical Applications](#)

[The HYPERplasia Challenge Research Article](#)

[The HYPERplasia Challenge Interviews](#)

[Goal Setting – An In-depth Analysis](#)

Introduction

For years, ABCbodybuilding.com has strived to provide resources for athletes to gain knowledge, stay motivated, and reach their peak level of potential. One of the avenues we have used to do this is a 12-week body building competition, known as the *hyperplasia challenge*. While many modifications have been made to this contest throughout the years, the central premise behind the event is this: to see which athlete can gain the most muscle and lose the most fat. The hope of this contest has always been to promote camaraderie among the members of this site, while concomitantly optimizing performance, and motivation. But the question begs itself: is competition the most effective way to do this? Or do additional and, perhaps more effective methods exist, which can motivate people, maximize performance, and promote fun? The following paper will attempt to display a method which for decades now, has answered the call as a viable alternative to competition. Enter the all too often neglected step sister of competition: *cooperation*.

I (Gabriel Wilson) have done research on this topic, and topics related to it for several years. I have given lectures to students at the collegiate level; presented and written articles at the Master level; talked to numerous experts; and spent quite literally hundreds of hours studying the top books and scientific journal articles on this topic. Therefore, I feel well equipped to discuss this subject, and am most pleased to have another opportunity to share this knowledge with others.

While I could discuss this topic for a very long time, I am going to attempt to keep this paper as parsimonious as possible. My main goal is not to get the world to abandon competition; rather, I want to open the eyes of others to a viable alternative, which is all too often ignored.

Note to the reader

I want it to be clearly understood that this article is not condemning the act of competition. The goal of this article is simply to explain to the reader several problems that can arise from competition. If the reader understands these problems, then during a competition, I believe they will be much better equipped with coping with them. Secondly, I do believe competition is over relied upon in many situations; and often, is highly inappropriate. Therefore, I am going to propose some alternatives to consider—namely, cooperation. My hope is that this will spark a fire on this website, and that together, we can develop methods to maximize motivation, fun, and performance for years to come—the possibilities are limitless!

Is Competition Unavoidable?

“America loves a winner, and will not tolerate a loser....Americans play to win. That's why America has never lost a war, for the very thought of losing is hateful to an American.” (General Patton). America is a society obsessed with competition. Some would even claim that “competition is an inescapable fact of life...we indeed have a competitive ‘code’ in our chromosomes” (Ruben, 1981) (note that no evidence was, or has been provided for this genetic “code” for competition). To this, Eitzen (2001) argues that the American society has been so indoctrinated with competition, that Americans simply assume competition is a natural part of life, “just like a fish doesn't understand water because it does not know anything different.” Perhaps the easiest way to determine if competition is part of human nature is to study various cultures. Indeed, if humans are inherently competitive, seemingly all cultures would be structured around competition, as America is. Mead and colleagues (1937) did just this, and based on the observation of dozens of cultures concluded that:

the most basic conclusion which comes out of this research [is] that competitive and cooperative behavior on the part of individual members of a society is fundamentally conditioned by the total social emphasis of that society, that the goals for which individuals will work are culturally determined and are not the response of the organism to an external, culturally undefined situation.

In support of this, Deutsch (1973, as cited by Kohn, 1992) who is considered by many to be the father of modern research on competition, suggests that “it would be unreasonable to assume there is an innately determined human tendency for everyone to want to be ‘top dog’.” Sport Psychologists Tutko & Bruns (1976), who have a great deal of experience with athletes of various age groups, agree, stating:

Competition is a learned phenomena...people are not *born* with a motivation to win or to be competitive. We inherit a potential for a degree of activity, and we all have the instinct to survive. But the will to win comes through training and the influence of one's family and environment.

Thus, competition is not an inherent attribute, but rather, a learned characteristic. This is further supported by studies showing that Americans are consistently more competitive than other cultures (Beatrice & Whiting, 1975). For a comprehensive rebuttal against the competitive human nature argument see Kohn (1992, *The “Human Nature” Myth*).

Seeing that competition must be learned, and has not only been learned, but is engrained in the American Society, we can now discuss cooperation as an alternative method to *learn*.

What is Competition & Cooperation?

Before continuing, let's take a step back and make sure we clearly understand the terminology being discussed in this paper.

Coakley (2004) suggests that competition is "A social process that occurs when rewards are given to people for how their performance compares with the performances of others during the same task or when participating in the same event." This involves an outcome (competitive) goal orientation of comparing performance to others and defeating them. On the other hand, cooperation can be defined as "A social process through which performance is evaluated and rewarded in terms of the collective achievement of a group of people working together to reach a particular goal" (Coakley, 2004). Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2000) suggest that "Cooperative learning exists when students work together to accomplish shared learning goals." In summary, these definitions suggest that cooperation involves individuals helping each other towards a common goal, and receiving a shared reward for their efforts.

Kohn further separates competition into structural and intentional competition.

Structural competition has to do with your environment. It means you are in a situation, where your success, by necessity, means someone else's failure. For instance, in order to win a tennis match, by necessity, someone else must lose. In other places, such as college admissions, or job applications, your acceptance, decreases the probability of another being accepted. Kohn refers to this as *mutually exclusive goal attainment* (MEGA). Which means, your success requires someone else's failure.

Intentional competition has to do with the person's goal orientation. Someone can be competitive, even in non competitive situations. For example, always trying to out do others, or win a contest, or show you are the "top dog" in a given situation.

To distinguish, you could be in a structural competitive situation, such as a tennis match, but you have a mastery orientation, and are just concerned with your own performance. Nonetheless, your success, translates into someone else's failure. So though you do not have intentional competition here, you do have structural competition.

Two other sub-categories are inter-group and intra-group competition.

Inter-group competitions are two teams competing against each other. This is wide spread in sport such as basketball, and baseball.

Intra-group is competing against people in your own group. For example, at a job, you are competing to see who can sell the most items.

Also, there is a difference between social comparison and competition.

You can compare yourself to someone without trying to defeat or be better than that

person (competition). For instance, you can read Shakespeare, and try to emulate him, and improve your writing style, using his writings as a source of motivation, rather than trying to be better than Shakespeare. John Harvey summarizes this, "It is one thing to act from a desire to excel somebody else at something (competition). It is quite another to act with a view to getting something done...and yet to be stimulated in the activity by a parallel or contrasted activity of others."

Also, if you are trying to beat a record time, that is not necessarily a competition. You can set up a standard for your own personal excellence, and try to attain it, without having the goal of wanting to defeat someone. So I can see that the mean time in my class for running a mile is 9 minutes, and my mile time is 11 minutes. And say, hmmm, that seems like a good improvement to make. And then, I take a mastery goal (focus on my own performance), and try to run a mile in less than 9 minutes. But I did not have to have in mind defeating others. I just used that comparison to see where I was.

Now, some say, "I am only competing against myself" Kohn says this is not competition. Competition, essentially, involves others losing. And *this* is the heart of the problem of competition.

Finally, focusing on your own performance, and having the desire to better oneself is not competition.

However, evidence suggests that humans are inherently motivated for self improvement.

I discuss this a lot here, [The Effects of External Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation](#).

Intrinsic motivation can be defined as an individual's need to feel self-determination, competency, and pride in something. Therefore, athletes who are intrinsically motivated participate in sports for no apparent reward other than the satisfaction and pleasure they get from the activity itself (Deci, 1971). Extrinsic Motivation can be defined as performance of an activity in order to attain some separate outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000, a). Therefore, athletes that are extrinsically motivated participate in sports for external causes such as rewards, positive feedback, recognition, etc.; rather than for the inherent satisfaction of performing the activity itself (intrinsic motivation).

Self-Determination theory suggests that humans have three central psychological needs, which are relatedness, effectance, and autonomy. Deci & Ryan (1994) summarize these needs in the following quote: "people are inherently motivated to feel connected to others within a social milieu (relatedness), to function effectively in that milieu (effectance), and to feel a sense of personal initiative in doing so (autonomy)" (p.7). Notice the term "inherently". This theory suggests that humans have an innate tendency to develop these needs. Nevertheless, these needs do not develop automatically; they must be furnished by the environment, which can either promote growth, or impede it.

With this in mind, the question is: how does competition affect motivation? Well, in order to understand this, we need to examine the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation.

Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation

I discuss this topic in-depth in the aforementioned articles. So the reader is referred to them for more detail. Below, I will give a summary, as it pertains to this article.

One of the ways commonly used to enhance motivation is administering external rewards. Based on his research, the current author suggests that a reward can be defined as an external agent administered when a desired act or task is performed, that typically has controlling and informational properties. Rewards can come in the form of verbal rewards (i.e. telling someone "good job!"), physical rewards (i.e. a pat on the back), or tangible rewards (i.e. giving someone money, food, or a medallion). Though there are several classes of rewards discussed in the literature, for the purpose of this paper, we only need focus our attention on one category—performance contingent rewards. These are rewards given for performance, usually based on a normative value. For example, doing better than 80% of the participants in an event. A sub category of performance contingent rewards are competitively contingent reward, which involves rewarding individuals for defeating others.

The number one theory for analyzing the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation is Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) proposed by Ryan and Deci. Essentially, CET suggests that a reward has two functional properties that can affect intrinsic motivation: information and control.

The informational aspect of a reward deals with competency. For instance, an MVP reward suggests that the person is competent, and will thereby, increase intrinsic motivation. Conversely, CET predicts that if a reward relays that the athlete is not competent, such as getting a last place reward, this will decrease intrinsic motivation. Second, rewards have controlling properties. This has to do with a person's locus of causality. Locus of causality is the degree people perceive their behavior to be freely determined (self determined) or caused by other people. If a person feels their behavior is caused by outside pressures from others, they would have an external locus of causality. If a person feels their behavior is self determined, or initiated, they would have an internal locus of causality. CET predicts that if a reward is perceived as controlling, people will attribute their behavior to an outside source (an external locus of causality). Conversely, if people do not feel controlled by the reward, they will attribute their behavior to self determination (an internal locus of causality).

To skip right on ahead to that data, Deci, Koestner, & Ryan (1999), who performed the most comprehensive analysis on the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation to date. 128 studies were examined using a meta-analysis procedure. Participants ranged from college to pre-school students. There were a wide array of rewards administered, including marshmallows and dollar bills. Results found that performance contingent rewards decreased intrinsic motivation (effect size (d) = -.28). However, participants in the performance contingent condition, who got less than the maximum reward, showed a sharp decline in intrinsic motivation—more so than any other group ($d = -.88!$). The theoretical rationale for these results is that participants who do not receive the maximum reward in performance contingent conditions, are not only being controlled by the reward, but they are being delivered information that they are incompetent. Since in many cases, the majority do not achieve the standard of excellence taken to obtain a performance contingent reward, these can be especially dangerous to administer. For instance, during one year at the "punt, pass, and kick" contest, sponsored by Ford Motor Company, in which participants from various age groups test their football skills, there were 1,112,702

participants, and amazingly, only 6 winners (Eitzen, 2001). Meaning that Ford may have greatly undermined the intrinsic motivation of the 1,112,696 athletes who lost!

Some have proposed that we should just give everyone a reward! Well, as stated, results indicated that people who were given performance contingent rewards, when they did not “win” or perform optimally, significantly decreased in intrinsic motivation. Think about it: how would you feel if you got a pat on the back from your teacher for getting an F on an exam?!?! That would just further decrease your competency.

The take home message is this: if you give a reward for winning a competition or for out performing your peers, you may enhance the intrinsic motivation of the person who wins the reward; it depends on several factors, which you will see by studying my article. But results indicate that all participants who lost, and did not receive a reward, or even those who do receive a reward, may tremendously decrease intrinsic motivation.

So you have to ask yourself: is it really worth the risk?

A last point I want to discuss, is that performance contingent rewards promote an outcome (competitive) oriented mentality. Instead of focusing on your own performance, your focus will be allocated towards defeating your opponent, which by definition, will promote extrinsic motivation, and most likely, undermine intrinsic motivation, as is supported by numerous studies.

As you will see if you study my goal orientation articles, several studies have found that a mastery goal orientation (focusing on your own performance) and cooperation results in increased effort, intrinsic interest, enjoyment, greater performance, less boredom, greater persistence, and seeking more challenging activities (Duda, Fox, Biddle, & Armstrong, 1992; Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Solmon & Boone, 1993). Conversely, studies indicate that outcome orientations (competitions) promote numerous adverse behaviors which decrease motivation, such as declines in concentration; further, this mentality commonly promotes unsportsmanlike conduct, including purposely harming others, and cheating (Duda, Olson, and Templin, 1991; Newton, & Duda, 1993; White, & Zellner, 1996). Why? Lots of reasons. Logically, if all you want to do is win—which is what competition promotes—then you often look past your opponent, and do what it takes to achieve that goal.

Since performance contingent rewards can be so harmful, let us consider some examples in the American society where these rewards have been applied.

In professional sports, numerous competitively contingent rewards are administered. The Super Bowl in Football; the Stanley cup in Hockey; the World Series in Baseball, etc. Sports also offer various other performance contingent rewards, such as MVP rewards and All Star Selections.

Participants, who win these rewards, may slightly decrease intrinsic motivation. However, the real concern is for the majority of individuals and teams who did not win these rewards. And as displayed, their intrinsic motivation will most likely, sharply decline.

I am a staunch sports fan. I continually read and also analyze the psychology behind these incredible athletes. One example that has particularly caught my attention, as it pertains to this topic, is the super star of the Boston Red Sox, who we affectionately know as, "Big Pappi" or David Ortiz. For those that have followed his comments over the MVP selection, you could just see his intrinsic motivation absolutely melting week by week as the debate over the MVP continued. This occurred both this season, and last season. In accord with this, he reverted to using ad hominem attacks against the popular vote for MVP, Derrick Jeter. Again, you see how performance contingent rewards can promote competition.

In the academic setting, teachers rely on "gold stars" to motivate their children. We also often times set up a competition in the class room, by publicly rewarding the most articulate piece of writing, or the highest math test scores, while seemingly ignoring the majority of the others in the class who may have in fact put in just as much hard work and effort as their much celebrated peers. Interestingly enough, the aforementioned meta-analysis by Deci, Koestner, & Ryan (1999) showed that children are most susceptible to the undermining effects of external rewards on intrinsic motivation, highlighting the dangers of these rewards in the academic settings.

The use of performance contingent rewards and competition in the scholastic setting is highlighted by America's current fascination with the spelling B competition, which has even been promoted by ESPN.

Perhaps the most dramatizing experience for a child in the academic setting is picking groups and teams. When analyzing this system, it too, is a type of performance contingent reward. Those who perform well, are rewarded with the first pick, or slightly lower; while those who perform poorly must endure the embarrassment of being unwanted and unloved by their peers; or at least, this is the perception of many who are picked near the bottom of the list, or even last.

At work, employees are rewarded for the most sales; for being the most helpful to others; etc.

In other settings, there are rewards handed out to the top art projects, math competitions, poetry, etc.

Essentially, American has designed a system where it is not about how much you learn in school, how well you can play sports, or how well you do your job at work. Rather, it is about winning, because as Vince Lombardi put it, in the American Society "Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing."

To finish this section, let us discuss an excellent portrayal by Alfie Kohn, of what performance contingent rewards do in the Academic setting. He discusses a little boy, who is bursting with anticipation to answer a question from his professor, and when the teacher picks on him he says, "What was the question, again?" This is quit humorous, yet, quit disturbing. By making our children earn our love and approval through performance contingent rewards, instead of giving unconditional support, we are diverting their attention away from what school is supposed to facilitate—learning—and towards what our society values most—a winner.

The Competition Performance Relationship

We have shown that competition can promote numerous side effects, such as cheating, and misconduct. And that it can greatly undermine intrinsic motivation. Now, let's analyze the crux of the matter—the competition performance relationship.

Triplet (1898) conducted the earliest known experiment on the effect of competition on performance. Participants were cyclists, who were instructed to ride alone with a pacer that recorded time, or in competition with another racer, who rode with them. Results found that cyclists were faster when competing against another racer, than when riding alone with a pacer.

More recently, Deutsch (1949) performed a classic study on the effects of cooperation vs. competition on performance and behavior. Participants consisted of college students, who were instructed to solve a puzzle over a 5 week time span. Participants were divided into two conditions. Participants in condition one were placed in a competitive environment, in which participants were told that the participant in the group that solved the highest number of puzzles would be rewarded. Condition two was a cooperative environment, in which participations were informed that they would be rewarded based on the total amount of puzzles the group solved, in comparison to other groups. Results found that participants in the competitive group were selfish, focused on defeating others, and did not communicate or trust members in their group. While the cooperation group communicated freely, had a better time, shared information, developed friendships, and solved more puzzles than the competitive group!

Similar behaviors of aggression and hostility in competitive environments are commonly seen. For example, the professional football player Jack Tatum (1980) admitted that he deliberately attempted and often succeeded in injuring opposing players, in order to eliminate them from the competition. And today we see drug use rising in many sports, including bodybuilding, largely for the sake of winning.

Johnson and Johnson (1981) attempted to answer this question through the examination of 122 studies performed between 1924 and 1981, which analyzed various skills such as accuracy and speed tasks. Their findings were consistent with the work of Deutsch (1949). 65 studies indicated that cooperation produced greater performance than competition, and only 8 studies contradicted this. Further, 108 studies indicated that cooperation produced greater performance than working individually, with only 6 studies contradicted this. More recently, Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne (2000) analyzed 164 studies from 1970-1999 on various cooperative methods in comparison to competitive and individualistic methods. Again, results consistently revealed that cooperative methods produced greater performance than competition (team and single competition) and individualistic work.

While I could quote literally hundreds of other studies to support my conclusion, I think it is suffice to say that cooperation will result in greater performance than competition or individualist work.

Alternatives to Competition

Now, the question begs itself: what are the alternatives to competition?

While there are numerous ways that cooperation and a mastery goal orientation can be applied in virtually all components of life, I want to give 3 ways to apply these principles. 1.) In your spiritual life 2.) In the bodybuilding community 3.) And finally, I am going to propose an alternative to the *hyperplasia challenge*.

Cooperation and the Bible

Ephesians 4:5

*There is **one** body, and **one** Spirit, even as ye are called in **one** hope of your calling; **One** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, **One** God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

To put it bluntly: the bible greatly promotes cooperation. Throughout the bible, Christians are encouraged to work together as one cooperative body, striving for the same goals.

One fascinating story in the bible is when the disciples are arguing among themselves, who should be the greatest among them. Christ immediately stomped this competition and promoted humility, and team work.

Luke 9:46-50

46 Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest. 47 And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him, 48 And said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great. 49 And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us. 50 And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.

Similar to this, John and his brother James asked Christ if they could sit on his right and left hand in heaven, again asking if they could be the greatest of the disciples. As you can no doubt imagine, the other disciples were not happy with John or James...

Mark 10:41-45

41 And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. **42** But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. **43** But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: **44** And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. **45** For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

It is the clear teaching of scripture that as members of Gods family, we must be of one mind:

Romans 15:6

That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

Phillipians 1:27

Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;

Phillipians 2:2

Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Unity is vital to the body of Christ. We are all apart of the same body, and we all are needed equally in Christ.

I think a great example of the power of cooperation can be found right here on ABC. In our [Sanctuary](#) and [Creation Science](#) forums, you can see the incredible support fellow Christians give to each other. It is an amazing and powerful display of team work.

Cooperation in the Bodybuilding Community

President Wilson, Adam Knowlden, and myself, have been working on this website for over 6 years now. During this time, we have been to, and even sponsored numerous body building shows; we have interacted with thousands of athletes, from elite pro-bodybuilders, to novices; and we have also seen how other body building sites and businesses operate.

One goal that we have is to promote unity among the body building community. It is very sad to see that there is a great deal of competition in our community. And sadly, this has lead to numerous unethical actions, such as trying to hurt other athletes or body building websites.

The question is: why?

Competition

Many body builders and body building business have been indoctrinated to believe the false notion that other athletes, or body building businesses failure=their success. The fact is nothing could be farther from the truth. By harming other body builders, you have essentially shot yourself in the foot.

People have to ask themselves as a body builder—what is their goal? Is it to get bigger and learn how to get bigger? Then why in the world would a body builder hinder other people who are dedicating their lives to this!?!?! Truly, this logical is absolutely befuddling to me.

Our dream is this: to generate cooperation across the field of bodybuilding. Instead of athletes mocking each other and talking about how horrible other people look—which is both vein and sinful—they should encourage one another! Instead of websites telling lies about competitors, gossiping, and wasting their time contributing absolutely zilch to society, except for hurting their fellow human and body builder—which again is unequivocally a sin—why not work *together* with other communities to further the body building community!?!?

Another unique advantage Adam, Jacob, and myself have had, is witnessing just this in the scientific community.

I cannot begin to describe how cooperative people in the scientific community are. If you need help from virtually anyone, other scientists are so graciously willing to lend a hand.

Both Jacob and I have calibrated studies and experiments with people from literally across the globe.

But imagine if instead, President and I just worked by ourselves? Well, I really don't need to speak of the results. The previous 10 pages have showed exactly what would happen.

Now, I certainly don't claim that we at ABC are perfect at doing this. We have also fallen pray to competition. But through intense studies, we have learned that this is not optimal. Therefore, during the next several years, and hopefully, many years to come, we will strive to bring together a fragmented body building society. And change it to a cooperative society, where athletes don't mock people because of their status of training, or because of how they look. But instead, where all body builders can come and work together as a cooperative unit to produce a powerful product of knowledge, growth, and fun.

An Alternative to the Hyperplasia Challenge

To read about this alternative, go to part 2 of this series, [Here](#).

Conclusion

Competition is considered by some as “an inescapable fact of life” (Ruben, 1981). However, when analyzing other cultures, it is clear that competition is not an inherited attribute, but rather, a learned social construct (Mead and colleagues, 1937). Seeing that competition must be learned, and has not only been learned, but is engrained in the American Society, it would be helpful to understand the usefulness of competition, in order to assess whether Americans should consider abandoning their past time “obsession”. In this context, the purpose of this paper was to investigate the efficacy of competition under various conditions. Results found that competition can decrease intrinsic motivation and promote extrinsic motivation, thereby, decreasing performance and enjoyment in activities. Furthermore, results indicate that America's wide spread use of performance contingent rewards is promoting the epidemic of competition, and greatly undermining intrinsic motivation. Finally, consistent with the aforementioned findings, studies indicate that cooperative techniques result in greater achievement than both competitive and individualistic methods. Collectively, these results dismantle the fallacy that competition is the only effective way to motivate people, maximize performance, and have fun.

It was suggested that we can apply these concepts 1.) In our spiritual life by working as one body in Christ 2.) In the body building community, by uplifting fellow athletes and organizations, instead of discouraging them 3.) In games on this website, by implementing cooperation among members.

Now, I know you are probably asking yourself at this point, "what the heck does this guy consider parsimonious to be?!?!?" What can I say, I like to write!

Keep it Hard-core,

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Note: refer to the aforementioned articles for additional references.

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