

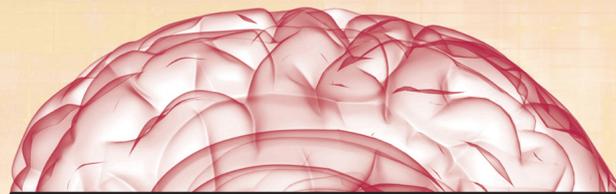
# PEAK PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOKS

The Mind and Brain Science of Performance Preparation, Practice, and Optimization



## PLAYBOOK III

*PEAK PERFORMANCE  
OPTIMIZATION  
FOR PLAYERS*



**NeuroMentor**<sup>®</sup>  
Institute for Peak Performance

PLAY TO WIN

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**David Krueger MD**

## PEAK PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK III

### The Mind and Brain Science of Performance Preparation, Practice, and Optimization

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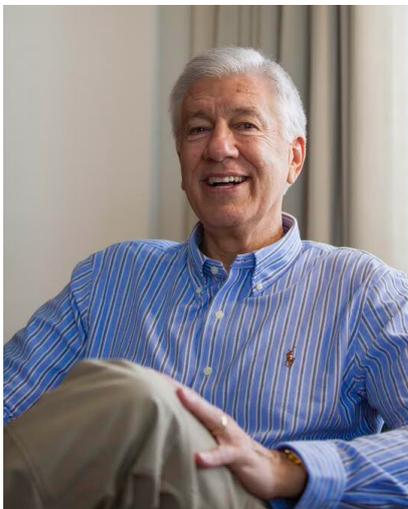
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## PEAK PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOKS

The Mind and Brain Science of Performance Preparation, Practice, and Optimization

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# PLAYBOOK III. PEAK PERFORMANCE OPTIMIZATION FOR PLAYERS

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## PEAK PERFORMANCE OPTIMIZATION FOR PLAYERS

Basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski spoke about his concern for his star players. “When I am coaching my Duke team, I need to be the best player’s best friend. Being the best player is a lonely position. Even though you get accolades, no matter how good a team you have, there is always some level of jealousy. Always.” Often exceptional achievement results in those star performers’ being left alone and coaches’ or mentors’ focusing on the low performers, taking for granted the continued excellence of the high achievers. According to Krzyzewski, that is a mistake. “Leadership is not just to let the star produce but to be a friend of the star, to motivate the star. Your team is going to go a lot further if your stars push ahead and everybody else has to work to catch up.”

The neuroscience of performance is based on a bedrock foundation of understanding both mind and brain. We’ll address performing under pressure, including pressure management tools for execution strategies to create and sustain success. Playing to win and playing not to lose are essentially different mindsets.

The specific challenges of exceptional achievement include success anticlimax, success traps, unfocused errors, and the brain habituation challenge of continuous success. Strategies for each of these, as well as sustaining and enhancing extreme success, are discussed. Staying at the pinnacle of success is both art and neuroscience, determined in part by the relentless pursuit of improvement.

# PEAK PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK III



## A. Optimum Performance Strategies

## Distinguish and Address Ideals

Your ideals are your internal standards of excellence. They are your core values, your personal model of what has genuine worth. When we live up to our ideals, we feel a sense of worth and esteem. When we don't, we feel shame and lack of fulfillment. Your ideals resonate with the core essence of who you *are*.

There are dozens of possible ideals. The key is to identify those few that are your guiding priorities, those core ideals that are most important to you, those which you most passionately believe in. Your core ideals may shift or evolve as you progress through life, but they will not stray too far from the "home base" of who you are.

From the list below, choose the three ideals that are most important to you. Be honest. Choose values that inspire you, not those you think you *should* value, that society tells you to value, or that you see others holding as valuable.

This list is not exhaustive; feel free to add others. You may find it easier to work through the list choosing more than three, and then go back over it again to narrow your list down. Once you've finished, fill in the three blanks at the bottom with your chosen three top ideals.

Achievement

Adventure

Beauty

Catalyze

Charity

Connectedness

Contribute

Creativity

Dignity

Discovery

Family

Feel

Freedom

Generosity

Growth

Happiness

Health

Honesty

Independence

Individuality

Influence

Intimacy

Justice

Kindness

Knowledge

Leadership

Learning

Mastery

Peace

Pleasure

Power

Self-esteem

Sensitivity

Spirituality

Success

Teaching

Truth

Winning

Other:

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My top three ideals, in order of most to least important, are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Four Guidelines for Living Your Ideals***

Once you've clarified your ideals, consider ways you might begin to incorporate them into your life. For example:

1. See how they apply.

Consider the different areas of your life, one by one—your career, life as a spouse, as a parent, a sibling, a friend, and any other areas—and explore how each of the top three ideals you've identified here applies to or reveals itself in each of these areas.

2. Honor your order of priorities.

Recognize and honor the hierarchy of ideals when making decisions. For example, the immediate needs of your child might supersede a desire to learn and be creative.

3. Appreciate the price.

Each ideal carries with it a price tag, so to speak; that is, there is a personal cost involved in being committed to upholding and honoring that ideal. For example, there will inevitably be sleepless nights and boring moments involved in raising a child.

4. Live your ideals.

Think of yourself as a tigress and your ideals as your cubs: they are your life, and you will do anything and everything to protect them. If you feel you have not been entirely true to your ideals or protected them with that kind of fierce integrity, then choose this moment as your time to reclaim them.

If you are unclear about any one of the ideals you've identified, spend additional time focusing on it, and if you feel it's necessary, rewrite that list until it rings unquestionably true for you.

## Distinguish and Address Needs

Unlike our ideals, which are standards of value to which we aspire, a need is an essential requirement that we must actually have present in our lives, a necessity for mind, body or spirit. Early in life, our needs consist of physical nurturance, empathic attunement, attachment, effectiveness, exploration, assertion, feeling and tension regulation, and sensory needs. In adulthood, our needs become adult versions of these same basic needs, all providing for physical requirements, comfort, identity, affirmation, love, communication, safety, and sexual/sensual needs.

Consistently meeting your own needs results in a sense of effectiveness and optimum functioning, like the satisfaction of having completed a task or project, knowing you have given it your best effort. Frustrated or unmet needs create the opposite feeling, of discomfort and ineffectiveness. For example, when the basic need for connection is derailed or nonexistent, we feel an emotional disharmony.

A need may be most obvious when it is not met.

As with ideals, each of us is unique and has a particular set of needs that we value more highly than the others. From the following list of needs, choose the three that are most important to you. This list isn't exhaustive; feel free to add others.

- |                 |                    |                 |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Acceptance      | Harmony            | Focus attention |
| Accomplishment  | Nurturance         | Relaxation      |
| Acknowledgement | Order              | Self control    |
| Actualization   | Physical activity  | Intimacy        |
| Care            | Recognition        | Passion at work |
| Certainty       | Safety             | Passion at play |
| Comfort         | Financial security | Other:          |
| Communication   | Emotional security | _____           |
| Control         | Simplicity         | _____           |
| Duty            | Strength           |                 |
| Effectiveness   | Time alone         |                 |
| Empathy         | Regulation         |                 |

My top three needs, in order of most to least important, are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

When your needs and ideals are in synchrony with each other and are combined with a clear vision and defined goals, all of your efforts go in the same direction. It will feel right and result in mastery.

A discrepancy can exist for organizational systems as well as for individuals. For example, corporate *ideals* might include teamwork, leadership, caring for and promoting the creativity of employees, innovation, and realizing human potential. Corporate *needs* include productivity and the bottom line of profit and loss. When the core ideals of a corporation parallel its core values of an individual within that corporation, both grow.

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## **Distinguish Wants from Needs**

Wants or desires are not fundamental constructs like needs or values. A want can be replaced with another want, and fantasies are readily interchangeable—but one need cannot substitute for another need.

While ideals and needs both spring from the very essence of who we are, wants are far more circumstantial. A particular want, for example, may arise as the temporary manifestation of an unmet need from the past, such as the unmet need for affirmation as a child resulting in adulthood in the relentless pursuit of validation, accolades and accomplishments. While needs are universal, wants are tied to experiences uniquely personal and with their own particular histories.

Unsatisfied wants may result from not having a defined goal (not having a definition of *enough*), or from trying to satisfy a past want in present time. While you can get sick if you don't get enough of a need, you can also get sick if you get *too much* of a want. You can never get enough of what you don't need.

If the desires you have don't serve you, *you can choose new ones*. Your wants are not carved in stone or cast in your DNA. And choosing desires for yourself that are in alignment with your needs—and even with your ideals as well—is a recipe for satisfaction.

## Ideals and Needs Decision Tree



Ideals and needs can be used to inform decisions and evaluate goals. This decision tree is one way to systematically assess and plan.

Conflicting needs, wants and values hinder our performance and drive us to invest time, money and energy in things that don't fulfill us. Accordingly, it makes sense to weigh every significant decision you make against the considerations of your ideals, needs and wants, *before* you make the decision.

- If the decision meets all three, it is a "Yes."
- If the decision is in alignment with your ideals and needs, but seems to be in conflict with a particular want, it is a "Maybe." Examine this particular want to see if it is significant enough to nix the decision. Since wants are more transitory than ideals and needs, a sound decision may overrule a want.
- If the decision opposes or does not meet one of your needs or ideals, then the decision can be "No" or "On hold."

This alignment of ideals, needs and wants can be applied to establishing direction and goals in all significant areas of life: home, career, relationships, way of being, business, personal success, financial plan, and spiritual development.

We live in a culture that is often very goal-oriented. There is nothing wrong with being focused on a goal—as long as the goal aligns well with your ideals and needs. If it does not, then you are working at cross-purposes and cannot possibly win, because if you win, you lose.

Before adopting a goal as your own, examine it closely to see whether or not it is in synch with your top ideals and needs. If it does align well with your ideals and needs, then move to *commitment*.

Once you have committed to the goal, then be loyal to yourself by *fulfilling* that commitment, not simply because you said you would, but because that goal is an integral expression of your ideals and needs, and thus its full-out pursuit—not only its final accomplishment, but the journey along the way as well—also serves as an essential *validation* of your genuine worth.

Because the goal is aligned with your ideals and needs, it is a consonant expression of who you are.

## Review and Revise Performance Beliefs

### *Passive Position to Active Intention*

Beliefs can either limit or facilitate change. We have an attachment to hang onto things the way they are, meaning to continue without change the way we are.

Various language content and patterns reveal underlying assumptions about the map, the plot of your story. These assumptions may facilitate or impede progress. Language reveals internal versus external point of reference, internal versus external authority, active versus passive position.

### *External Authority Phrases*

Pressure words reveal an external point of reference, assuming an external authority.

- Should
- Have to
- Need to
- Must

### *Limitation Words*

- Cannot
- Impossible
- Should not
- Something stopped me

### *Passive Positions*

- The feeling took over
- Anger seized me
- Doubt crept into my mind
- The impulse seized me
- A part of me resisted working
- I came to an impasse
- Suicide entered my mind
- My mind played tricks on me
- I found myself doing that

Creating your own performance story involves recognizing that the story has not been ghost-written from the past, as if someone or something were handing you the lines in a script. The way you structure our language reveals underlying belief systems.

To challenge a belief, consider the following:

- What could I do if this assumption were not in place?
- What belief would serve me better?
- What can I shift that belief to?
- Am I capable of having this limiting belief hold me back?
- Have I outgrown this belief?
- Have I discovered this belief is not true?

## Success Ideals for Players

Consider the people and behaviors that represent respect, admiration, status, and ideal achievement to you. Imitating the powerful is a natural process to align with and incorporate that power for yourself. To participate in power, prestige, and status may initially require imitation, then modeling of that behavior until it becomes internalized as an ideal, as part of identity.

- Whose behavior do you most admire and want to copy?
- Who do you try to imitate?
- Who is your favorite writer/athlete/business person?
- Who do you most envy?
- Who do you most imitate in terms of conversation and communication?
- If you could be respected and praised by one person in your life, who would that be?
- In the history of mankind, what one person would that be?
- When you think of what someone else thinks of you, who do you first think of?
- When you practice, who do you imagine seeing you and smiling in approval?
- Who would you most like to respect you?
- Who would you most like to praise you with acknowledgment and words?
- If some famous person were to reference you and praise something about you, who would it be and what would it be about?
- Who in your life would not be surprised to see your remarkable success?

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## Making Choices: Inquiries for Enhancing Your Performance

The following queries focus awareness on how you choose.

- Reflect on what changes in practice you can make independently.
- Consider which changes you need to make collaboratively, such as with a coach or team.
- Recognize when you should let someone else make the final decision.
- Identify what you can and what you can't determine. Put all of your energy in what you can determine. Accept what you can't determine.
- Get rid of the things that you don't want. Let past mistakes teach you, then let go of them.
- Every increment of behavior, such as each bite of food you take, is a separate choice. Do you like your choices? Every choice you make affects now and tomorrow in some way.
- What accomplishment, if completed within a week, would produce significant movement or impact? Are you willing to do it?
- What accomplishment, if completed within a month, would produce significant movement or impact? Are you willing to do it?
- What accomplishment, if completed within a year, would produce significant movement or impact? Are you willing to do it?

---

## **15 Caveats on Being Your Own Authority**

1. Each day is a new and blank page. You create whatever you choose this day.
2. You choose what you perceive.
3. You choose how you process what you perceive, the meaning that you attach.
4. You choose the behavior from the belief that you have created.
5. Focus on the present moment, with specific, tangible, current goals synthesize past, present, and future into this moment.
6. You create what you expect. If you focus each night on three positive things you did during the day, and then on how you can improve and expand those three things, you will be right. If you focus on three negative things, even implicitly by default assumptions that seem automatic and continuous, you will also be right.

7. A mistake or bad experience is a failure only if you do not learn from it. Whatever happened or did not happen during the day, however bad or overwhelming, will end in a positive way when you focus on your specific achievements at the end of the day and how you may further them.
8. After you choose a vision and goals, intentional choice continues. There is more than one path to your goals; the paths are as variable as your creativity.
9. Goals and agreements are complementary. A goal is what you shoot for, a target. Agreement is a promise you make to yourself or another. Know your agreements consciously and be loyal to them; a deal is a deal, especially with yourself.
10. Changing a habit that doesn't work allows you to apply the energy to a conscious goal.
11. It is the process of looking to someone or something else to fill what is missing that creates something missing.
12. If someone else chooses your boundaries, they become restrictions; if you choose them yourself, they become principles.
13. Both conformity and opposition occupy the same prison.
14. A true freedom is not requiring someone else to respond in a particular way in order for you to proceed, or to be happy.
15. That which you can imagine and believe can be achieved. You become what you believe yourself to be.
16. To the extent that you focus on the responses of others, and leave out your own subjective experience, you abandon yourself. If you rely on others for your needs, you may create a dependency that deprives you of the pleasure of effectiveness and mastery. And compliments never help if you don't believe them. To become the hero of your own story requires establishing an internal ideal and living up to it—being your own authority.
17. Taking care of yourself is a confrontation and acknowledgement that no one is taking care of you. One way to resist actively taking care of yourself is by maintaining an addiction—the illusion that some substance, thing, or person will be an answer and provide what is missing.



## **B.** Sustaining Player's Peak Performance Under Pressure

## **An Exercise in Assessing Your Performance Behavior**

What would it be like:

If you registered judgment or criticism from others as their self-statement?

If you were free to be who you really are?

If no one has any control over you?

If you do not try to control anyone else?

If you put all of your energy into doing only what you can determine?

If you weren't afraid of expressing your dreams?

If you weren't afraid of saying what you really want to say?

To do what you really want to do?

To do what you most enjoy doing?

To know exactly what you want and what you don't want?

To get rid of the things you don't want in your life?

To ask exactly for what you need?

To not worry what anyone else thinks about you?

To not attempt to determine anyone's opinion about you?

To live your life without judging others?

To let go of judgments and criticisms that you have of yourself?

To let go of judgments and criticisms you have about others?

To not paint someone else as wrong or at fault?

To not have to be right or win?

To not have to work at acceptance?

To not be afraid of rejection or abandonment?

## Performance Enhancing Rituals

### *Can a specific ritual enhance performance?*

In a number of studies, athletes who used a pre-performance routine performed better than those who did not.

- A pre-performance routine can boot up the specific mindset for the skill to be performed. An example is the mantra for a free throw.
- Warm-up routines enable preparation and access to a state of mind of optimum performance, whether for a specific athletic endeavor, a keynote presentation, or an executive board meeting.
- During a performance, default routines need to be automatic, subject to immersion in flow.
- Post-performance routines promote not only recovery but reflection and review of the performance for the sake of ongoing improvement.

Effective focus for optimum performance includes some fundamental elements:

- A decision to focus on only one thing
- Concentration on thinking and doing the same specific thing
- Attending to only those aspects that are under your control
- An outward focus to counter performance anxiety, preoccupation, or distracting thoughts
- Avoidance of internal focus, which can introduce doubt, worry, self-criticism, and hypervigilance

A ritual may include one component of the mantra of neural conditioning to immediately access an optimum state of mind.

Superstitious behavior rituals are designed to bind anxiety and may not work well as a performance routine. A superstitious ritual may work temporarily but can distract by investing attention in an irrelevant object or action, as if it is a causal link with performance. A superstitious ritual can decrease anxiety and enhance confidence temporarily. However, it may not be the best or most direct way to enhance performance. A performance routine can be a specific and beneficial ritual and can be distinguished from superstitious actions that are repetitive yet distinct from technical performance. The primary difference is that a superstitious act emerges from a desire to influence or control the uncontrollable, especially in the face of uncertainty. Superstition is a form of magical thinking that can be a pre-performance routine but needs to be assessed for improvement vs. anxiety-binding.

The key to optimum performance is to enter an optimum state of mind for the specific performance, a state that contains the software of the deliberate practice and execution of that specific skill. A routine or ritual can guide for performance execution.

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## The Quiet Eye

Your mind is like a camera that focuses on one among an almost infinite number of possibilities. The Quiet Eye is simply close-up attention to the final step in a performance sequence. Specific focus on this one aspect quiets the entire system for optimal execution of a task.

Eye-tracking research on the “quiet eye” shows that for a precise motor task like free-throw shooting, putting, or tying a surgical knot, experts maintain quiet eye 62 percent longer than nonexperts. Quiet eye focus specifically increases precision. Dr. Joan Vickers, professor of kinesiology at the University of Calgary, showed a free-throw accuracy increase of 22 percent after quiet eye training. She emphasized focusing on a single spot on the hoop, such as midway between the front and center, and continuing to do so through the shot. Begin at least a full second before initiating the shot and don’t shift eye focus for even a nano-second. A quick fluid motion without losing focus on the quiet eye spot becomes most successful.

Academic and business performers can learn a great deal about how to apply the quiet eye concept from research in athletic settings. Focus aligns the energy field of the brain and has the functional role of readying the entire system for the next step, especially important when performing under pressure.

Quiet eye training enhances the default motor system execution of skills for a specific target. Sports science shows the benefits of choosing the best visual target for purposeful and goal-directed eye movements. For example, when basketball players miss free shots, it’s often because they briefly move focus from the spot on the rim where the ball is going to the ball itself. Also, it’s been found that when soccer players miss a penalty shot, it is most often because they briefly shifted their focus from the ball’s targeted destination just inside the goalpost to the goalkeeper, which obscures the target. In a similar way, an executive can be side-tracked by an emotional reaction to a colleague. The more important the task, the more important the quiet eye becomes.

Practice under high pressure enhances performance under pressure. Studies show that high-stress practice for everyone from basketball players to police officers far outpaces low-anxiety training as a way to establish and maintain an output channel of performance and quiet eye focus.

## A “To Do” and a “To Don’t” List for Positive Focus

### *How can you as a player address a repeated focus on tangents of what to avoid?*

While we cannot control what happens to us, we can determine how much it affects us, and where we direct our focus and attention. A simple example is rather than focusing on obstacles that hold us back, to refocus on things that move us forward and the positive connections.

This 3-step process can counter negative thoughts or self-talk. And, with repetition, result in brain neuroplasticity.

1. Reframe the thought as an error message from your brain
2. Delete it
3. Refocus on what you do want that is positive and part of your plan.

Consider visually a “delete button” in your brain, so that when you think of something negative, or have an intrusive thought, it becomes a simple visualization of deleting that negative thought.

Don’t believe everything you think. Focus helps you know what specifically to pay attention to.

Researcher Daniel Wegner found that stress usually causes a reversion to avoid the negative—a “Do not ...” internal instruction. Since the unconscious brain is only aware of focus and not positive or negative valuation, this unfortunately brings about whatever the “Do not ...” focus is on.

This exercise aims to create immediate awareness of negative focus or self-talk to refocus on the desired outcome.

1. Discover all the things that you focus on that you *don’t* want. Make a list of all the things that you do not want as you notice yourself focusing on them or thinking about them. A “to don’t” list.
2. Be very specific about what you *do* want. Make a list. A “to do” list. Be certain that what you do want is not just what you do not want in disguise. The desire to avoid something is usually the result of negative emotional experiences with what you want to avoid. Trying to avoid those things paradoxically creates them. You get what you focus on.
3. Work on these lists over time because much of your awareness is not conscious. These two lists will crystallize many beliefs and assumptions that you may not have been consciously aware of.
4. Each time you think about an outcome that you do not want, stop and consciously change your thinking to focus on precisely what you do want. Identify the feeling that comes with what you don’t want to immediately refocus on a positive action.

5. Keep being aware and working on both lists. Practice changing your focus. Persist in positive focus. Write down the lists and the revisions.
  6. Ask yourself questions that help you focus on positive outcomes. Rather than, “Why can’t I do this?” Ask yourself questions that are positive and lead to furthering a positive focus, such as, “How can I ...?”
  7. These changes are a hard work miracle. Practice in persistence is paramount.
- 

## **Using Self-Talk to Enhance Performance**

A CEO I will call Dan experienced a tragedy at his company in the form of a serious accident that resulted in on-the-job injuries and a death. In the three months after the accident, he had the stress-related symptoms of losing sleep, depleted energy, and preoccupation with safety. He recognized that his responses hampered his effectiveness as an executive and his ability to provide the leadership that his company needed, and he contacted me for executive coaching.

I asked Dan what went through his mind the moment he woke up. His immediate answer: “What could go wrong today?” He wondered what he could do to ensure safety for his company, how he could stop feeling helpless, how he could assure the group that there would be no more accidents, how he could mitigate any potential future danger.

I explained that we are always asking ourselves questions, whether or not we are conscious of them, from the moment we wake up. And this internal conversation sets in motion a mindset to initiate the day to build on. This inner dialogue is almost unconscious and at stressful times can include questions like “What’s going to happen today?” “Will I be able to handle it?” and “What am I most afraid of?”

He recognized that the negative mindset that began his day for the three months since the event had been essentially the same and had set the tone for both himself and his corporation. Not only his executive team but each employee had embraced his concern. He knew he had to do something but wasn’t quite sure what to do, as nothing seemed to work for very long.

I suggested that sometime during the day or evening before he went to bed, he write down three questions that would put him in an empowered, positive state of mind, questions that would focus on his effectiveness and instantly boot up a state of mind of confidence and mastery. And to answer those questions each morning as soon as he woke up.

The next week at our session, he immediately reported the difference those questions had made. By shifting consciously to positive self-talk, he booted up a positive mindset that built on itself throughout the day.

This initial reframing of his self-narrative to direct the power of focus to launching a positive state of mind became a model that he had passed on, directly and indirectly, to his organization. He noticed, within days, the impact it had on his executive team and how this change trickled down through the organization.

## **Self-Talk to Engage a Performance Mindset**

A sizable body of research has shown the value of engaging in self-talk, specifically to objectively frame a situation. Professional athletes need to get grounded and centered after every play, particularly after an emotionally stimulating play. We are just beginning to study and understand the functions of inner speech, of talking to ourselves silently in our heads. Self-talk can anticipate, self-regulate, and motivate. A brief cue word or gesture can instantly reset us to an ideal performance state.

We always engage in self-talk, always ask questions, whether or not we are consciously aware of this process. This recognition and awareness can reframe to focus on self-directing positive, enhancing questions for a success mindset. The first step is to be aware of the running commentary of self-talk.

The challenge of peak performance is twofold: to enter an optimum mindset for the task and to sustain focus for flow and performance rhythm.

Dr. Samuel Marcora and his colleagues demonstrated the effectiveness of a brief self-talk intervention. Volunteers completed a cycling test to exhaustion. Then, before another cycling test two weeks later, half of them were given guidance on positive self-talk while the other half were not. The self-talk phrases included “feeling good” and, later in the race, “push through this.” The emphasis for the self-talk group was to have the phrase fit their particular style and construction. In this second cycling test, the self-talk group persisted 18 percent longer than the controlled group. This showed how a simple self-talk can influence experience and the resulting performance. Many other studies involving have proven the validity of this concept.

## **Self-Talk: First and Third Person**

A study of Olympic gold medalists found two traits that set superachievers apart: complete confidence combined with self-talk for entering the state of mind of confidence. Elite performers rigorously monitor their self-talk as well as their states of mind. Examples of audible self-talk by athletes include Serena Williams’s shouting, “Come on, Serena,” and LeBron James’s speaking to himself out loud.

First- and third-person self-talk can be effective, with first person being the initiator of action, the internal point of self-reference, and third person serving as the observer, an observing mentor or observing ego to reflect and self-correct.

Brain imaging shows that first- and third-person images and narratives stimulate the brain. Both imagining and watching yourself doing something stimulates the brain in the exact way that experiencing it does. This can amount to an effective component of practice. Imagining doing something rather than just intending to do it activates the brain and makes follow-through more likely. The more specifically you imagine something, the more likely you are to actually do it.

At times, talking to yourself in the third person is the way to transcend the emotion of the moment or even an emotional state through enhanced objectivity. An example is the highly charged career decision that LeBron James had to make about leaving Cleveland to go to Miami to pursue championships. As he struggled with whether to leave his hometown Cavaliers and join the Miami Heat to move himself to a new level in his career, he described his thought process. “One thing I didn’t want to do was make an emotional decision. I wanted to do what’s best for LeBron James and to do what makes LeBron James happy.” He initially referred to himself in the first person, but when he discussed how he wanted to avoid an emotional decision, he switched to the third person, “LeBron James.”

Research shows that using the third person this way is an effective technique for distancing yourself from stress, anxiety, frustration, or sadness and helping you regulate your reactions. It can also reframe stressful situations as challenges and opportunities rather than as threats.

## Self-Talk to Enhance Commitment

In the six-month Navy SEAL training, more than two-thirds of the candidates will drop out in the first eight weeks. Pain, sleep deprivation, and frequent harsh wet and cold conditions effectively ensure that, on average, only 25 percent of the candidates will make it through. What determines who makes it? Instructors observe that there is one true predictor of which candidates will ultimately succeed: *wanting it the most*. Commitment. Candidates who make a full commitment to their goal of becoming a Navy SEAL differ in that they decide ahead of time that quitting is not an option regardless of the challenges. This commitment increases their chances more than strength, agility, speed, and intelligence.

Of all factors that lead to it, commitment is ultimately and finally a behavior. Commitment is an “I will.” Commitment is not the same as motivation. Commitment guides intentional direction and purposeful practice. A commitment of goal completion “no matter what,” regardless of how you feel, is necessary for success. Otherwise there can be any number of reasons sufficient to justify scaling back or rationalizing stopping early.

There will always come a time when there will be a choice between emotions driving behavior and commitment to a plan driving behavior. How you direct emotion can make a huge difference in fulfilling a commitment. A commitment to persevere is, particularly for the most difficult moments, not the easier or more convenient one. This is what separates elite performance from everything else. As Dr. Eddie

O'Connor said in consulting with a hockey team at halftime after a challenging first half with numerous personal fouls, "You can get mad and fight or you can get mad and play hockey. You can't do both."

In another application, a study showed that sales agents who score in the top 10 percent for optimism were able to sell 88 percent more than the most pessimistic bottom 10 percent. This is not about skill or ability but about perseverance based on the story of an internal conversation.

The most resilient individuals are those who create a self-talk about failure being an anomaly, and they keep going. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania found that what measured as helplessness was really the pessimism of the self-talk that "I'm not cut out for this" or "I'm not really good at these things." This helplessness can be converted with proper framing and self-talk into optimism. Research validates that optimism is associated with better health, a longer life, improved survival of cardiovascular disease, and more positive opportunities to result in happiness.

Seligman found that pessimists' stories and optimists' stories diverge in this way: Pessimists believe that bad events will last a long time, are universal, and are basically their own fault. Optimists believe that bad events are temporary and look for a specific cause and remedy rather than blaming themselves.

Our self-talk stories keep us going or stop us. Our stories need to be greater than our pessimism or our suffering. And especially greater than a story line that has become part of a behavior and attachment pattern of not being able to do it.

Self-awareness becomes a crucial component of both monitoring and understanding this process. Self-awareness determines whether we can objectively question and understand our behavior and whether we can take in different perspectives, including those of coaches.

*The most common reason you can't have what you want is the story you tell yourself about why you can't have it.*

## **Framing Self-Talk for Resilience**

Angela Duckworth's research at the University of Pennsylvania shows that those with grit—the fortitude to stick with tasks—rely in large part on the self-talk of the story to give it meaning. We continuously talk to ourselves every minute. When we speak to ourselves positively ("I can do it") rather than negatively ("I can't do this anymore"), it has a major impact on resilience—the mental toughness to keep going.

Inner dialogues can facilitate rebound from failure. Engineering Professors David Franklin and Daniel Wolpert have identified five mechanisms of brain operation that go into action when someone successfully bounces back from failure or circumvents it. Each mechanism has a specific corresponding brain function to allow us to directly access an inner dialogue to rebound from failure with resilience and transform to success.

### 1. Redirection of negative feedback

Whether external or internal, it focuses energy in the brain in a negative way.

*Self-reflection questions:* What can I learn from this? What are the possibilities here (rather than the problems)?

### 2. Creation of obstacles

Consider that the obstacle you are experiencing is not something external that you simply need to strategize a way to avoid or overcome but that the obstacle is not there until you create it through the way you see or frame something. To say this a different way, an obstacle is the unconscious mnemonic of desire. Show me an obstacle and I'll show you a desire. When you are ready to consider that you are creating the obstacle, you are ready to consider the possibility of not creating it.

*Self-reflection question:* What would it be like to not create the obstacle and instead put the energy into what I want?

### 3. Use of systematic forecasting

We each use invisible brain algorithms to predict the future. Our brain creates new pathways and networks for anything we repeat, so it develops a default mode to save energy. These hard-wired patterns become predictive because they create the story that we anticipate, even unconsciously. To preempt this automatic system, we have to consciously self-reflect to see if the software that was developed at an earlier time in a different place is applicable to the current situation or if it's outdated and we need to predict and respond differently.

*Self-reflection question:* Is my usual pattern optimum for this current situation?

### 4. Assessment of the current model

Self-reflect to assess the effectiveness of what you're doing and if it is working. This requires, at times, disruption of automatic expectations and not continuing to inhabit the story that we want to believe.

*Self-reflection question:* Is this plan really working?

### 5. Direction to an output channel

No matter how much we acquire information, study, and learn, it is by putting it into action—using the output channel—that we not only enhance effectiveness but actually create a performance memory.

*Self-reflection question:* What do I next need to put into action?

## Self-Talk Exercise: Empowering and Limiting Words

Words can change your brain and your body. Our bodies listen to the words used at a subtle level. Words are powerful in that they set both expectations and limitations about how much we're capable of.

Seligman has found that optimistic expectations become a significant component of actual performance. Beliefs directly affect the outcome of efforts and performance results.

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*Create a list of empowering words.*

Words and language are a part of mental software that drive behavior. A simple example of building an "out" such as to say, "I'll try..." can be reframed in a more powerful way as a commitment: "I will." Exceptional performers become aware of limiting beliefs because the beliefs can frame a mindset.

Examples of empowering words that can boot up superior performance:

- Powerful
- Accomplished
- Unstoppable

We set intentions by using empowering or limiting words and our unconscious follows. The unconscious does not know the difference between negative and positive, just the focus. This form of unconscious programming can have powerful effects either negatively or positively.

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*Create a list of limiting words.*

Whenever you hear yourself thinking or saying any limiting word, immediately delete and reframe to an empowering word and thought. This form of immediate biohacking can be extremely effective in cuing your radar to be aware of a default mode.

Examples of limiting words that can boot up limiting performance:

- Try
- Can't
- Bad

The unconscious listens to all labels. The unconscious brain listens to context, not to negative or positive.

## Understanding Unforced Errors

*“I think self-awareness is probably the most important thing towards being a champion.”*

**Billie Jean King**

The term originated in tennis to refer to an error committed by someone who has every capacity to keep the ball in play but makes a mistake not caused by the other person’s play—it’s entirely an internally generated mistake. Correctly stated, the cause is not evident as originating from an opponent or an external circumstance but is self-imposed. Simply keeping the ball in play, returning every shot, allows an opponent to then make an unforced error. Often the player who makes fewer unforced errors wins. Coupling that with a quicker recovery from the unforced error results in more successful play.

Perhaps one of the best self-reflections—although done entirely in career retrospect—is from John McEnroe in his book *You Cannot Be Serious*: “For the first few years, I almost never spoke an obscenity to an umpire or linesman. Then, at a certain point, I went over the line. There were reasons for it—reasons, not excuses ... Once I began to go over the line, I should have been defaulted [disqualified].”

He was not disqualified for his famously bad behavior on the tennis court because by that time he was a highly regarded superstar. At an earlier point in his career, however, and in the careers of less famous players, it would constitute an unforced error. Refraining from publicly challenging a teammate or a coach becomes an important aspect of self-regulation in maintaining the performance zone.

The unforced error is one that is both completely avoidable and self-generated. Mistakes that can sabotage a performance or a reputation need to be studied as certainly as success strategies and factors in exceptional performance. Dr. Leo Levin introduced the term *unforced error* in 1982 to describe as an error in tennis competition that is “committed without a cause.”

Extreme success brings its own neural chemistry, mindset, and challenges. At times the experience of invincibility and accompanying self-indulgence can increase the likelihood of unforced errors due to diminished objectivity.

Because unforced errors are not always conscious or logical, reflection becomes a crucial component of recognition and revision of behavior. The most insidious and potentially dangerous errors are ones due to unconscious biases, inattention blindness, and other judgment calls that are not recognized by the player who makes them. And if they were pointed out, a double down of mistake would be to compensate, defend, or deny. A simple mistake is not an unforced error, yet persistence, compensation, and defending of a decision in the face of contradictory evidence can create an unforced error.

## **Operating and Non-Operating Performance Errors**

The first assessment is to recognize the type of unforced error and to consider various perspectives in order to devise remedies for optimizing performance.

Jeffrey Krames identifies two types of serious unforced errors: the operating error and the less common non-operating error. An operating error is simply making a wrong decision for a play or a company and sticking with it. The introduction of New Coke in 1985 by CEO Roberto Goizueta and the pushing of SUVs while gas prices were soaring are two organizational examples.

A simple lack of humility, as manifested in narcissism or lack of appreciation of another's point of view, can induce unforced operating errors. In any organization, someone who shows arrogance, or a sense of entitlement alienates everyone below and above them in the organization.

A non-operating error is the result of bad judgment regarding discipline, self-control, or character such as sexual misconduct with an employee, insider trading, or other ethics violations. Arrogance, sense of entitlement, and a failure of empathy can result in unforced operating errors.

The unforced errors based on narcissism, arrogance, and sense of entitlement are not necessarily fixed and need not automatically result in replacement, reassignment, or firing. The individuals willing to honestly and objectively assess can engage successfully when there is an understanding of the issues that manifest in the error. The issues can be addressed within the strength of a resilient working alliance and in the coach's understanding of the necessary components of recognition and change. An important aspect is that the coach not take it personally, understand the best efforts of the player, and believe in the process of understanding and change.

A form of unforced error is to both assume that people above on a team chart know more than you do and to fail to seek information from people throughout the team, including those at the bottom.

### **The Ultimate Unforced Error: Fatal Flaws**

A focus on improving strengths is a best overall strategy, in contrast with excessive focus on weaknesses. Yet there are some weaknesses that cannot be ignored: the fatal flaws.

No amount of peak performance or brilliance in other aspects of performance can counter a fatal flaw. A fatal flaw includes a spectrum of characterological issues such as dishonesty, cheating, lying.

There are some "fatal flaws" that can be overcome with attention and strategy. Recognition of these issues can be essential to addressing them as early as possible:

- Inability to learn from mistakes
- This is not simply the lack of a growth mindset but a disavowal, denial or hiding of mistakes, making it impossible to learn and correct.
- Failure to embrace new ideas
- Maintenance of the default mode and status quo while failing to consider other possibilities, new ideas, and options for change can stymie progress and performance.
- A lack of collaborative and interpersonal skills and abilities
- A lack of social skills combined with avoidance of self-reflection and effective collaboration stymies both individual and organizational development.
- Blaming of others and lack of accountability
- Blaming others can combine with claiming responsibility for success individually when it belongs to the team.
- Passivity in initiating action and responsibility for performance
- individually or collectively, passivity ensures an unforced error and its continuation.
- Distinguish between something that is not done and something that is done incorrectly.

Remedies for these unforced errors include considering alternatives, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses, seriously considering all feedback, making adjustments in performance, and always keeping an open mind with a proactive growth mindset. Not hiding weaknesses and developing areas of both mistakes and strengths generate a foundation of growth.

Passion alone can create tunnel vision when it manifests as an obsessive pursuit, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Holmes, founder and CEO of the biotech company Theranos. Her father worked with Jeffrey Skilling at Enron, another story of the obsessive pursuit of passion without a grounding in balanced dimensions of achievement. The relentless and at times obsessive pursuit of success can go awry to create unforced errors when it loses its grounding in ideals and ethics.

The federal government indicted both Skilling and Holmes for massive fraud. Theranos was at one point valued at \$9 billion, and Skilling was CEO of a \$60 billion company and was named by *Fortune* magazine as the most innovative large corporation in America. Although, by all known accounts, neither initially sought to defraud the public, each had a relentless passion that may have blinded them to anything other than its total and obsessional pursuit.

Unforced errors are especially likely to occur when someone loses sight and enjoyment of the game and focuses only on winning, and they're compounded when the success is so huge that there are no previous experiences or even reference models.

## A ROADMAP System for Unforced Errors

**R**ecognize that you are making an error.

Unless you are aware of making errors, you will keep making them and not take corrective steps.

**O**wn the responsibility of committing the error.

Taking ownership and responsibility begins with personal recognition of the error and its impact. In a broader context, ownership may require responsibility for failing to incorporate feedback, not including current relevant information, or not recognizing the shifting perspective of the team around you. The player is not always aware of making errors. Admitting to errors is a first step in reversing errors and enhancing performance.

**A**ssess the unforced error and the mindset accompanying it.

The mindset includes individual responsibility as well as team impact and success.

Assessment covers preparation, execution, and impact to correct the error at all levels.

Self-reflection and self-assessment are crucial and become the antithesis of blaming others.

**D**ecide a next best action for individual responsibility and team member responsibility.

**M**ap changes based on information, results, and feedback.

**A**uthor the corrective action incorporating feedback and personal judgment for responsibility.

An action plan may involve individual as well as team changes. Peak performance is an individual as well as a team endeavor and achievement.

Peter Drucker says at this juncture: "Don't tell me what you're doing. Tell me what you stopped doing."

The adjustment from an unforced error to successful accomplishment involves both undoing and doing, just as new learning involves both unlearning and learning.

**P**rogram new identity

Noel Tichy wrote in *The Leadership Engine* that a leader must have both the initiative and the courage to change core, fundamental components of their business at times in order to evolve and remain viable. This fundamental aspect of identity incorporates individual as well as team performance.

Each step of success needs to be metabolized as an evolving transformation of identity.



# C. Sustaining Extreme Success

## Exceptional Achievement and Overconfidence

*“It was very difficult to see him become even bigger than life. He had so much so soon. He was snatched from the ordinary life of a young man into a place that no one had ever been in society or in our culture.”*

**Priscilla Presley** on Elvis Presley

If you ask any player in a physician’s basketball league whether he or she could compete with LeBron James, they would laugh. Yet many of those same physicians willingly compete with the billionaire investor Warren Buffett. Cognitive biases and mental errors make them believe they can outperform successful full-time investment experts.

Some of those who have achieved in exceptional ways can create challenges for themselves in the management of that success. Some highly successful individuals, from actors and athletes to practicing medical and legal experts, begin to believe they can be good in other areas, such as investing. Expertise in one area does not equate with expertise in another. Even Buffett recognized this about himself: “I don’t think being able to allocate capital means you’re good at anything else.”

Overconfidence creates a misperception of ability when it is informed by spectacular success in one area. University of Pennsylvania psychologists Phillip Tetlock and Barbara Mellers studied more than twenty-five thousand forecasts from people whose task was to anticipate how the future would unfold. Their studies, like a number of others, revealed exceptional overconfidence in the judgments of doctors, lawyers, engineers, and even scientists in their decision-making processes.

The stimulation of overconfidence is biologically habituating. Look at the recent revelations of politicians, actors, and athletes who came to believe their success made them immune to boundary violations. Elite athletes such as Roger Clemens, Zinedine Zidane, Michael Vick, O.J. Simpson, and Tiger Woods, each will be remembered by their greatness, but side by side with their vulnerability and bad decisions at the pinnacle of their successful careers. Extreme narcissism, or at times the massive overstimulation of significant success make it difficult to consistently *personally* regulate emotion and manage states of mind, despite having consistently *professionally* managed performance pressure and state regulation.

Extreme success moves beyond anticipation to encounters never before experienced, and possibly never imagined. An example of a dilemma of extreme success is exemplified by a challenge faced by professional poker players: to know when to stop playing. They realize they have stayed with the hand and bet on it long after they should have folded. Some professional athletes extend their play beyond when they should have retired. Overconfidence is fueled by extreme success and can lead to subsequent performance compromise.

*Some people need coaches not to become successful but to help them regulate their states of mind and manage emotions to sustain success.* Complacency and overconfidence become equal challenges, as do the consequences of success and failure. The success of fame and wealth can induce a state of mind to believe you are untouchable, can transcend usual boundaries, and even make up your own rules.

Performing professionals train for skill development, performance optimization, and successful achievement. They do not train for the psychological consequences of fame. Their talents and achievements merit fame, but their personalities may have a struggle standing up to it.

Navigating extreme success creates unique challenges. Exceptional success can exceed all usual and expectable categories, such as when an athlete plays well or defies the limits of physical aging. It also occurs when accomplishments—or the resultant fame or wealth—transcend any possible preparation or model for engaging it. Extreme success can bring exquisite vulnerability. Success that transcends usual experiences and known models creates greater vulnerability. The way to end any discomfort is to go back to the familiar—in this case, to leave success and return to the usual. If the immediate discomfort is treated, success and its pursuit are abandoned.

A significant factor in performance psychology is that excellence is not normal. The top 1 percent do what the other 99 percent are unwilling or unable to do. The pursuit of excellence and expertise requires dedication and resilience.

Assessing overconfidence becomes a challenge. We strive to make confidence a state of mind and a framework for an immersion in performance practice and flow. Additionally, we are trying to objectify something that is essentially unconscious, meaning that omissions of logic are invisible.

While confidence is a state of mind that generates remarkable productivity, overconfidence can become a slayer of success. While our minds constantly learn from challenges, internally and externally, the complacency of power can derail the creative and empathic process.

The more we know and the better we become, the more likely we are to overestimate our own ability as well as underestimate the events beyond our control. In one study, CEOs became more confident as they gained merger and acquisition experience, resulting in their overvaluation of subsequent deals. In research from the University of Vienna, investors who obtained significant experience with their market became overconfident to result in risky asset trades.

Overconfidence grows with sustained success and power and can replace self-reflection with blind certainty. Overconfidence increases with familiarity, repetition, information, and success. One of the best predictors of overconfidence is power, which enhances with time and experience and can result in the cessation of questioning alternate possibilities.

Ultimately, the brain rewires repetitions to make them the default mode, so overconfidence and certainty increase with actions. Our habits become invisible to us. The more any action is rewarded, the quicker it becomes a habit and, thus, the harder it is to break. A habit, our collection of repetitions, becomes the default mode of the brain and approximates mindlessness.

Immense passion can lead to early and significant success. Similar derailments happen when someone loses the anchor of identity and becomes fully absorbed in successful results and whatever it takes to achieve them. The point of reference shifts in these instances from an internal one with ideals and needs to an external one of rewards and accolades, with constantly escalating achievement that's never good enough. The rewards and their anticipation transcend the joy and even purpose of the activity itself. Because internal ideals do not have an endpoint—no “good enough” to ever arrive at—validation shifts to an external source.

To rely on the response of someone else to determine how you feel about yourself creates an immediate vulnerability and a framework of ineffectiveness, a framework in which no one will ever respond exactly as you want them to, as if scripted by you. Even when it is rewarding in the short term, the ever-ascending and never-ending desire for more is always there. When someone does not respond as if they were an extension of your interest or desire, ineffectiveness and frustration are built into the framework of expectation. Disappointment and anger inevitably result. Skilling and Holmes did not tolerate even significant success and growth without the ever-ascending pursuit of greater and more. The amalgamation of an identity and an external result ensures vulnerability.

Daniel Kahneman, psychologist and Nobel Prize winner, called this the hedonic treadmill. The ever-escalating pursuit of success ensures that success is never quite enough. This adaptation to escalating success is a biological and psychological phenomenon. Hedonic adaptation means that someone quickly adapts to a new level of success, pleasure, or income so that the anticipatory excitement of dopamine no longer registers. A move to restore that pleasurable feeling of dopamine raises the inevitable question, “What's next?”

With greater success, worry focuses on the continuation of that success, on the possibility of losing the edge or even on the achieving of still greater success. This directly affects the flow of performance toward an observer role and derails successful performance.

Well-known scenarios occur in the relentless pursuit of continuing success and can involve the taking of performance-enhancing drugs, plagiarism, cheating, or other unethical behavior.

Ways to squander success can include *self-defeating attitudes* such as:

- It's too good to be true.
- Something is bound to happen.
- This can't last.
- The other shoe will drop.
- When something really good happens, I don't want to be surprised, so I get ready for bad to happen.
- I expect the worse, so if it happens, I'm ready. If it's not, I'm surprised.

Or *self-destructive actions* such as:

- Beating disappointment to the punch (which ensures disappointment).
- Rehearsing a crisis or disappointment, which creates its enactment.
- If I give in to joy, I will set myself up for disappointment. If I am satisfied with enough, I'll lose my motivation for more.
- It will be never be enough, so why go all out?
- Pushing a bad image or behavior cue out of your head, which engages it.
- Focusing on the negative, whatever the intent of that focus, which gives it energy.

Success intoxication results from becoming enmeshed in the escalating pursuit of success to become lost in its stimulation and affirmation. Indications of success intoxication: a reliance on the extremes of accomplishment; accelerating success with heightened metrics; an evolving erosion of other important matters to the process leading to success; blurred boundaries between work and personal life. The stimulation of extreme success, such as in business or athletic endeavors, can make it harder to regulate emotions and stay grounded in values and identity. Cindy Adams summarized, "Success has made failures of many men."

### ***How can extreme success be maintained?***

*"The toughest thing about success is that you got to keep on being a success."*

**Irving Berlin**

Althea Gibson, winner of eleven major tennis titles and the first African-American to be named the “female athlete of the year” by WHO, said very simply, “Most of us who aspire to be tops in our field don’t really consider the amount of work required to stay tops.” The relentless, grueling, repetitive work of deliberate practice is essential, and it is no less grueling and deliberate to sustain and even expand that success, especially when it reaches remarkable levels.

A specific challenge for those who achieve extreme success is to figure out a way to stay passionate about the pursuit of excellence rather than simply enjoying the fruits of success. The systematic approach to climbing a mountain cannot be abandoned when reaching the top, yet it must be transformed to continue excellence on top of that mountain.

Elite performers are not distracted by the victories or failures of themselves or others. They concentrate on what they can be effective in determining and they let go of everything else. They focus exclusively on the task at hand, the flow of the performance endeavor. This exclusive focus, a type of compartmentalization, fuels resilient practice and sustained peak performance. Elite performers actually love the pressure and feel immersed in the process and the energy of full engagement.

Elite performers in business, sports, and the arts often are equally passionate about their hobbies. Richard Branson is as passionate about his hot air balloon adventures as he is his primary business. J.J. Watt became consumed in the offseason in helping Harvey flood victims in Houston with a passion equal to that which he brings to his defensive all-pro prowess.

Similarly, the ability to rebound from defeat comes from this intense focus on and passion for aspirations and long-term goals. Small achievements pave the way and provide ongoing incentive in the ever-present and necessary experience of effectiveness, step by step.

Teams and companies continually push one another to elite performance in ways they would never achieve if they were working alone or with less-accomplished colleagues.

Elite new performers in every domain maintain an insatiable appetite for feedback to use in deliberate practice and performance. They seek advice. They want to improve development and progress, while celebrating their accomplishments. This celebration along the way is more than reward, more than emotional release, and involves continued analysis with enhanced awareness and ever-continuing deliberate practice. A constant dialectic can balance celebration with continued striving and accomplishment. Getting to the next level of performance becomes the purpose of celebration. Celebrations become meaningful with consistent elite performance and victories.

Mick Jagger summarized the strategy: “It’s all right letting yourself go, as long as you can get yourself back.”

## Success Anticlimax

*“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”*

**Robert Louis Stevenson**

The morning after Bruce Jenner’s last decathlon, he asked, “What am I going to do now?”

Olympic gold medalist Victoria Pendleton offered a slightly more elaborate comment on the same dynamic. “People think it’s hard when you lose. But it’s almost easier to come in second, because you have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost.”

After a long-practiced and anticipated success, people often have to deal with a significant anticlimax experience. The sprint system of anticipation is mediated by dopamine, the pleasure chemical, which can sustain the excitement of expectation of a positive consequence. This can last, as we know from various performers, for years or even decades.

For any physical or intellectual achievement, the emotional role and creative closure have to be addressed upon successful completion. I have known a number of authors who describe a letdown after completion of their book. One even described it as postpartum depression. The most successful achievers have evolved their capacities to recover faster from success anticlimax.

### *What makes superachievers in sports, arts, or business so relentless in their successes?*

*“It’s about squeezing every last ounce of juice out of this life. We’ll celebrate some things, but we’ll very, very quickly move on to what’s next.”*

**Andrew Garfield.** Tony and Golden Globe Award winning actor

Relentless superachievers have something far simpler than genes, training, education, and internal drive. The athletes and executives I have worked with and others who I have interviewed have learned how to contend with the anticlimax of success to sustain anticipation by *laddering achievement* to focus on *what’s next*.

Matthew Syed, a former Olympian and author of *Bounce*, finds that relentlessness is in part an evolved capacity to deal with anticlimax faster and more effectively, to emotionally disengage from a long-sought goal once achieved, and to refocus more quickly on new endeavors. This attitude was succinctly summarized by Manchester United Soccer Club manager Sir Alex Ferguson, who in only a few minutes after holding up a record ninth Premier League soccer trophy said, “I’m already looking forward to next season. Let’s get on with it. I’m looking forward to going on to win a European Trophy as well as pushing for the league.” And the next year they did.

Nick Saban, head football coach at the University of Alabama, consistently tells his players to not think about championships and wins but about the preparation and the performance of the process itself *each day in practice*.

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## The Summit Syndrome

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*“There are a lot of people in the world who will take the challenge to climb the mountain. But when you get to the top of the mountain, you become the mountain because everybody’s shooting at you. The great ones can get to the top of the mountain and say, “You know what, I can be even better.” “*

**HBO Sports:** Belichick and Saban

Those supercharged and successful performers who consistently acquire new knowledge and evolve new skills surpass even their own previous benchmarks of excellence. They push their own limits to expand beyond what was expected, at times beyond their own vision. Their identity becomes consolidated around challenge, resilience, and success performance. Their brains have become habituated to the consistent excitement and pleasure of anticipating what is next. Then when achieving it, to again ask what is next.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the greatest challenge can come immediately after the completion of a long-anticipated accomplishment, especially at the end of a career of such accomplishments. What it takes to climb the mountain is a different mindset and neurochemical system from those required to maintain a position at the top of the mountain. And still different from what it takes to have a happy and purposeful life after you come off the mountain. Different mindsets and different neurochemical systems are involved in each of these three phases.

Someone can become habituated to the unique experience of mind, body, and neurochemistry in any one of these developmental phases. To continue improving performance and to keep dopamine and adrenaline flowing, one must continue to look for ever-ascending possibilities of success and to frame continuing success in an evolving way. Superachievers who realize significant success after a long engagement and often exclusive focus on achievement then have to make a significant transition in order to not continue searching for the same stimulation despite an already achieved goal.

George Parsons and Richard Pascale offer an interesting perspective to my research and work on success anticlimax for performers. They described the corporate equivalent of this process in the *Harvard Business Review*. Their application in a corporate setting outlines how “steps taken at the right time not only can allow extreme overachievers to surmount the summit syndrome but can also deepen their capacity to lead.”

Throughout the process of deliberate practice and accumulating successes, the player has generated a heightened appetite for stimulation. Unless this is planned strategically and specifically for what to do next, it can lead to a vulnerability to various stimulating substitutes, including drugs, risky investments, and exciting but bad relationships. Often, the peak of career success when someone is feeling most invulnerable is the very time that they are, in practical terms, most vulnerable. Especially if, at that time, they attempt to recapture or replicate the stimulation in alternate ways.

At this point, internal and external may not match. External metrics of immense success may be in contradiction to becoming habituated to such stimulation, to wondering about what’s next, to being confused about how to sustain the achievement excitement.

This process is prominent in professional athletes after the sudden achievement of a lifelong goal, as in the example of Bruce Jenner, or an end to a career after injury or retirement. Throughout, self-regulation challenges are in the foreground, ranging from the continued stimulation of “what’s next?” to how to sustain the excitement after arriving at the summit of the mountain.

Challenge is diminished or negated if the outcome is certain. This takes away the stimulation of the dopamine-mediated stimulation which asks, “What’s next?” Think about the major successes you have achieved, probably with sustained immersion and dedication and with the outcome not determined until the very end. Throughout, “What happens next?” and “What do I next need to do?” sustains attention and stimulation. Think about how differently this may be experienced if you knew that everyone who participated would get the same trophy or the same reward of whatever nature. This is not the way the mind and brain work.

After a significant achievement and the continued stimulation of new challenges and endeavors, reaching the summit of success can potentially have the paradoxical effect of diminishing a passionate edge. The buzz seems to be missing. The continued dopamine stimulation of “what’s next” is no longer there because all the next challenges and opportunities have been achieved.

With no new stimulation and challenge, the edge can morph into boredom and lack of stimulating motivation. Common questions may be “Did I lose my edge?” and “What is left to achieve?” Is this reaching a limit or simply feeling stuck at a plateau? The novelty, challenge, and looking to the next achievement during all the stages leading to the successful attainment are no longer there. Or, at least, they have to be successfully reframed to sustain the evolution of even further skill, challenge, and success. The summit syndrome has to be reframed to a different paradigm of sustaining and enhancing achievement.

Very different from burnout and the depletion of intolerable workloads, this experience simply means that the framework of novelty and the challenge of climbing the mountain needs to be reframed to sustain passion and interest in staying at the top and even exceeding former visions and definitions of successful attainment.

Rather than a plateau, this experience can be a signal to look for access to the next level of achievement and reframe interest and focus to a new level of performance. Knowing that the brain craves novelty, in reframing of the next challenge and the next level you need to consider what was not previously envisioned.

The coach as catalyst empowers others to produce extraordinary outcomes. For each individual player and for the team, this ongoing striving for and achieving of excellence is an ultimate purpose and outcome. Transformational coaches look beyond attaining immediate goals to shaping larger strategies and visions for establishing continuously evolving performance benchmarks.

A successful performance achievement profile is not a single straight line to peak success but a process of continued practice and performance, including ups and downs, and especially of being able to sustain and enhance success once it is reached, especially when it is beyond what either player or coach has envisioned.

Often the player does not recognize—or even have reason to reflect on—different stages of the performance trajectory/career or understand the entire process in terms of developmental stages. Their winning formula that works on the ascent of the mountain becomes an outdated game plan and even a handicap once they’re at the top. A different system and a different identity are required, and this is its own strategy and system.

Self-regulation can be a challenge for someone such as a very young athlete who is suddenly paid millions to tens of millions of dollars without having the experience of gradually adjusting to increasing monies, especially when this instantly transports the athlete from life experiences of low income or poverty.

When anyone engages a task or position that moves beyond a core identity, discomfort and uncertainty lead the way. There is no core bedrock foundation of identity in a new social and economic framework.

More than 80 percent of lottery winners of \$3 million or more declare bankruptcy within the first five years. Their money changed, but their mindset did not.

### *How can a sense of purpose sustain success to avoid the Summit Syndrome?*

Surf legend, Laird Hamilton described engaging and sustaining extreme success in this way, “The true challenge is how you continue doing it, after you have ridden the biggest wave, crossed the longest distance. You set up challenges that are more than what you ever did before. And by getting through it, you get the sensation you have completed something.”

Like talent, purpose is not inherent or even discovered, but cultivated. Passion, purpose, and talent need deliberate effort and practice to develop.

A number of research findings reveal an optimistic picture in which individuals with a strong sense of purpose are more willing to take risks, persist, and have a significantly higher degree of successful outcomes, whatever area of performance they choose. Those with a higher sense of purpose are grittier and more persistent in Angela Duckworth’s classic study of sixteen thousand participants.

It is important—imperative—for a team to have a shared purpose to unite players so they can achieve individual and collective optimum performance. Many studies of exceptional performance find that the exceptional performer can catalyze teammates to excel. The star performer can be either a distraction or a motivator for excellence. Exceptional immunologists boosted their colleagues’ research productivity by 35 percent; the most outstanding 6 percent of physicists led research teams that generated 50 percent of all physics papers published. Wharton School of Business Professor Adam Grant has shown in his research that when people see how their work affects others and have a shared purpose, they work better, harder, longer, more generously, and more productively.

To make purpose come alive, players must understand how their efforts make a difference and how their efforts make a difference for themselves, for each other, and for the greater good of the team. Motivation is also enhanced by an appreciation of how each individual’s work benefits the well-being of others on the team.



# D. The Art and Neuroscience of Winning

## Playing to Win vs. Playing Not to Lose

Dominique Moceanu at age fourteen won an Olympic women's gymnastics gold medal in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. It was the United States Olympic women's first-ever team gold medal. Moceanu appeared on magazine covers and talk shows after this remarkable feat.

But Moceanu peaked at the young age of fourteen, and instead of continuing a legacy four years later at the Sydney Olympics, she was the victim of unforced errors. She had burned out.

The reason for this burnout, as she later clearly articulated, was having a consistent external focus rather than a desire from within. She indicated that rather than an internal motivation and purposeful passion, she sought to avoid the authoritarian judgment and criticisms of her parents and coaches. "The sport I had loved so much was slowly becoming a nightmare as I trained with my coaches the summer before the [1996] Olympics," she said. "I pushed myself as hard as I could, but I always felt like I couldn't please them. As much as the coaches treated me with disdain and lack of respect, I kept trying to gain their approval. I feared Coach Bela Karolyi like I feared my father, Tata, yet I still tried to please both of them." After winning the gold medal in 1996, she was disappointed and did not celebrate with her teammates. "I realize then that no matter how much I wanted to feel happy, my happiness depended on what my coaches and parents thought of my performance and whether or not they were pleased with me," she said. "It was hard to be happy when I felt I wasn't perfect enough for them."

Her unforced errors came indirectly as a result of the fact that her point of reference was on pleasing others rather than an internal purpose and passion. Her fear of failure, while seemingly fueling her motivation at the time, became toxic. A fear of failure can lead, as it did with her, to stress, burnout, and diminished longevity.

For some competitors, competition facilitates creative output enhanced by motivation and effective preparation coupled with a comfort with conflict and opposition, a necessary building block for effective competition. Those whose performances suffer in competition, on the other hand, are intimidated by the intensity and emotionally withdraw.

Reframing fear as the excitement of achievement is a way to play to win rather than not to lose. The most fundamental distinction is this: if you focus on what you will win, you engage an optimum performance mindset. For a soccer penalty kick, everyone is the same twelve yards away from a seventy-two-square foot target guarded by one goalie. When *playing to win*—when making the goal will result in a win—kickers are successful 92 percent of the time. Now consider the framework of *playing not to lose*: the team is down by one and you have to make it to tie, and if you miss your team will lose. When that's the case, the success rate is 62 percent. Same distance, same target, two different mindsets that result in a 30 percent difference

in success rate. In the threat mindset, expectations are high and there is the feeling of judgment—you can't make a single mistake. You play not to lose. The result is more anxiety and booting up of an entirely different mindset from the playing-to-win mindset.

Rewards-driven behavior has an external point of reference and entails a drive to seek approval by others and external rewards. Being driven by fear means doing whatever it takes not to lose, to not disappoint others, and to focus only on results.

We seek pleasure by playing to win. We avoid pain by playing not to lose. When you play not to lose, you most likely ensure loss because this shifts the operating system of the brain. The brain has two neurochemical systems, one wired to seek pleasure by winning, the other wired to curtail risk and avoid mistakes, to avoid pain and play not to lose. The two most fundamental motivations of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are hardwired, and supported by the software stories of our mind. Seeking pleasure leads to gain orientation, while avoiding pain leads to prevention orientation.

With gain orientation, we take risks and look for potential reward. Prevention orientation generates caution to avert risk. The closer we get to a goal, the greater the weight of the tendency to shift into prevention-orientation.

An application: a situation can be seen as a challenge—the perception of opportunity to shift mindset to the reward center to take risks, activating the gain-orientation system. A threat warns to shut down to avoid mistakes. Two very different mindsets with two different levels of performance and results. Most successful performance is in the challenge mindset.

In summary, some of the distinctions between playing to win and playing not to lose:

- Playing to win is based in confidence; playing not to lose is based in fear.
- Playing to win optimizes performance; playing not to lose is defensive.
- Playing to win is thriving and superiority; playing not to lose is surviving and mediocre.
- Playing to win creates special experiences and memories; playing not to lose creates stressful experience and moments.
- Playing to win optimizes abilities; playing not to lose compromises expression of abilities.

## 32 Guidelines to Further a New Performance Story

1. Distinguish need from want.

You can get sick if you don't have enough of what you need, and you can get sick if you have too much of what you want.

2. You always have the right to say no or yes.

Don't hesitate to say no or yes when you are clear about what you want and need. Also, as a wise mentor once told me, never speak more clearly than you think. The other person also has a right to say no or yes. So don't hesitate to ask.

3. You have to be free to say no before you can be free to say yes.

Unless you are free to say no, yes has no meaning.

4. Coming to the end of your past, especially resolving emotional issues, isn't enough: you have to have a purpose, a dream, in order to give hope a blueprint.

5. Have a "big picture" and bring it into focus whenever necessary.

The big picture consists in your own ideals and principles, and objective organization of your life and decisions according to what you believe to be in your best interest.

6. Establish priorities.

Every day you will redefine and refine priorities, and make decisions about what is really important in each area of your life: Family, work, health, friendships, leisure, self-care, and finances, to name a few. Neglect in one area creates imbalance.

7. Have specific, attainable goals on a short-term, daily basis as well as in the big picture.

Setting specific goals allows self-affirmation once you attain them.

8. Disengage from "what might have been."

You may lose today and tomorrow looking back for yesterday. "If only" fantasies idealize the past and erode today.

9. Engage what you can be effective in doing and disengage from that which you have no determination.

Adhering to these two tenets and distinguishing the difference between the two can create a powerful impact on your performance.

10. Seek out suggestions, critiques, and advice.

Consult with people knowledgeable in specific areas. At times this may be difficult emotionally, when it would seem easier to consult (collude) with someone who would mirror and agree with your own opinions rather than listening objectively to critical or contradictory information. Don't limit yourself with your imagination, because your imagination has to evolve from your present model. Other points of view may be a catalyst.

11. Sleep on it. Recognize that there are few true emergencies in life.

Weighing different factors, gathering data, and perhaps consulting experts work best to make most decisions. Rarely does any legitimate crisis demand that these steps be skipped. A classic example is the promoter who tries to push you into an overnight decision, to make money decisions in a fraction of the time it took to earn the money. Decisions based on impulse, frustration, or anger may need to be postponed until objectivity is regained. Calling a time out is a useful maneuver for emotionally charged matters. "Let me think about that and I'll get back to you" is a decision.

12. Select goals consistent with your self-image.

This is necessary to have all of you going in the same direction. We live our lives based on our beliefs and assumptions; to change your life you must first change your belief.

13. What you decide to accept undergoes a change.

To forgive someone is to free yourself.

14. To get what you wanted in the past may not feel as expected, because it is no longer the past.

Just having a choice can make choosing the same thing feel very different.

15. For an end point, ask yourself, "What is good enough?"

Driven pursuit of perfection arises from not having a standard of good enough—of not having established an end point.

16. “What is in my best interest?” should always be in the background and, at times, the foreground.

Asking this question is just another way to assess the big picture, at a time when you may be focusing on details, or in the grips of excess emotion.

17. The past may not be the best or the most relevant context in which to understand the present.

The model of understanding must fit the situation, your style, and your personality; it should be consistent.

18. Create a contemplation space to ponder decisions, especially emotionally freighted ones.

Between an urge and an action lies a potential space in which judgment resides.

19. Growth involves enduring uncertainty.

20. Not only can we change, we can also choose how we will change.

21. Insight and understanding may initiate both internal and external change to be addressed.

The more you think about how much you missed out on, the more you miss now. When you stand up, your lap is a memory—it can be recreated, and if you continually have to return to it, it interferes with proceeding.

A player commented, “I wish there were some magical words you could fill me with, so I didn’t feel bad.”

My gentle but firm response was, “There are. Stop searching for magic.”

22. Growth and change involve their own mourning.

You have to relinquish a past position in order to move ahead.

23. The only familiar territory is behind you.

24. Growth and change are hard. The only thing harder is not growing or changing.

25. Our experiences are always consistent with our theories.

Most often we attempt change by changing our experiences, which often only produce new editions of the old experience.

26. Clarify your external goals.

Be certain there is a fit between your internal and external goals, that what you want to accomplish is consistent with your ideals. This consistency can provide an organizing structure and direction to your ambition.

27. Anything important requires a commitment to go forward despite discomfort.

A commitment is a decision you only have to make once—then you can direct your energy to fulfilling the commitment.

28. Know what reaching a goal will do.

Then you can distinguish clearly what it will not do. For example, reaching a goal will not undo the past, or make other troubles go away. Monetary wealth may bring many things, but it may not make your marriage better.

29. You'll never do anything important that will feel comfortable in the beginning.

Anxiety about the new and unfamiliar do not equate to the old anxiety coupled with danger, warning about the need to head to safety. This new anxiety can be a signal, an affirmation, that you are moving ahead to do things new and unknown.

30. Trying to change your past is not change; it will always be the way it was.

31. Decisions always limit choices while activating others.

32. We suffer most from our anticipations and limit ourselves most by our assumptions.

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## Experts and Amateurs

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*“When ya get to the end zone, act like ya been there before.”*

**Coach Bum Phillips** to rookie running back Earl Campbell

An expert and an amateur are each states of mind. “The expert” is an ideal, a contrast to “the amateur.” Evolution from amateur to expert is a significant, life-changing passage when it occurs. The following distinctions can apply to that process of transformation.

**The expert** continues concentrated, deliberate practice on focused areas and develops with informed feedback.

**The amateur** gets to a level of good enough and stay there.

**The expert** does not take things or people personally, recognizes that others always make self-statements, and does not succumb to criticism, envy, or idealization of others.

**The amateur** is subject to the perception of others, to rejection, and reads the responses of others as if looking into an accurate mirror of a valid reflection.

**The expert** self-regulates and self-validates, takes in new information but does not let it determine meaning.

**The amateur** becomes an extension of the interest, desire, and needs of others and is vulnerably reliant on the perception and feedback of others.

**The expert** has an internal point of reference and is proactive.

**The amateur** has an external point of reference and is reactive.

**The expert** does not take success or failure personally, but as lessons to enhance excellence.

**The amateur** takes both success and failure as self-reflection to define identity.

**The expert** seeks the mastery of art as work, deliberate practice as lifestyle, success as creation.

**The amateur** believes that art is inspiration, talent is innate, and seeks the lucky break.

**The expert** believes that the architect of magic is informed persistence and dedicated resilience.

**The amateur** believes that magic is magic.

**The expert** shows up every day, no matter what, and is committed for the long haul. The expert understands delayed gratification, is the ant, not the grasshopper; the tortoise, not the hare.

**The amateur** shows up as long as something else doesn't get in the way. The amateur looks for shortcuts, quick results, and immediate gratification.

**The expert** knows to focus on what can be done uniquely well.

**The amateur** tries to do many things, to be everything to many people.

**The expert** always treats practice like a game.

**The amateur** saves the best for an actual game.

**The expert** knows that the self and every storyline in life are created moment by moment, that the ultimate abandonment is of one's self.

**The amateur** believes that much is predetermined, some fate, some circumstance, some luck; that consistent attention must be received to feel appreciated and accepted by others.

**The expert** believes that we write, live, and create in order to know.

**The amateur** believes that we must know in order to write, live, and create.

**The expert** adds value to art, to science, to an expert body of knowledge, and to others.

**The amateur** adds value to self.

**The expert** proceeds despite fear and uncertainty, knowing that certainty develops mastery.

**The amateur** believes that certainty, confidence, and comfort are prerequisites to proceeding.

**The expert** has a plan and sticks to it no matter what.

**The amateur** responds to the prevailing mood, mindset, or urgency rather than purpose.

The **expert**, even at times a warrior, believes in humility and modesty.

The **amateur** believes in never showing vulnerability, doubt, or uncertainty.

The **expert** punches through the bag and runs through the finish line.

The **amateur** hits the front of the bag and relaxes at the finish line.

The **expert** knows that courage is to proceed despite fear.

The **amateur** believes that courage is the absence of fear.

The **expert** sticks to the plan.

The **amateur** lets life get in the way.

The **expert** determines what is important and works toward a purpose.

The **amateur** reacts to the urgencies of life.

The **expert** pursues the plan and purpose no matter how they feel.

The **amateur** acts when in the right mood or feeling.

The **expert** consistently pursues success despite a routine practice that might entail boredom.

The **amateur** pursues success when motivated or inspired.