

GREATNESS

THE
= 16 =

CHARACTERISTICS OF

TRUE CHAMPIONS

Third Edition

Don Yaeger



GREATNESS
The 16 Characteristics of True Champions

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To Dale Brown:

*For more than 35 years you've been everything
from my best friend to my Best Man,
helping to shape my thoughts, my career,
and, most important, my life.*

I am honored by your investment in me!

DY

= ACKNOWLEDGMENTS =

This book is the culmination of nearly 30 years of interviews during my career in journalism. As a result, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to every editor who ever assigned me a story, giving me an opportunity to live out a dream. While still in high school, my father offered me a simple challenge: Make sure to learn something from each champion I interviewed about what allowed them to separate themselves from their peers. So for that, I owe my father as well. His challenge led to the answers and the words you'll read here.

To the staff who worked exhaustively to help me organize and grow my observations on Greatness from a collection of ideas to the fully-developed pillars you see here, I offer my sincerest thanks: to Jenny Fernandez, who helped me manage my first foray into speaking about Greatness; to Anjie Cheatham, who then stepped in and has done wonderful work opening doors for speaking; to Dave Moore, who has been an extraordinary piece of my writing team and has done such a great job every week getting my Greatness newsletter distributed—you are such a tremendous talent; to Elton Gumbel, who knows better than almost anyone how best to tell a story; to Linley Wartenberg, who provided some great examples and shared her vast knowledge of hockey; a number of other members of my writing team over the years also played a role in keeping stories fresh; and finally, to the dozen or so interns who faithfully added to and maintained my collection of Great quotes—I know it wasn't the most exciting part of your workday, but it made a difference, and I thank you all for it.

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This book would, of course, not have been possible without the insight, wisdom and perspective of so many incredible athletes and coaches. There are far too many to even begin to name here, but their stories grace these pages and their lessons have changed my life profoundly. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for opening your lives and sharing your stories with me and with everyone who is pursuing Greatness. You not only showed what true Greatness is, but how to achieve it...and that is the Greatest lesson of all.

Starting in 2020 I began a podcast that has given me hundreds of additional hours of conversation around Greatness. Thanks to the huge "assist" of my talented producer, Savannah Gallagher, the Corporate Competitor Podcast (<https://donyaeger.com/corporate-competitor-podcast/>) has become a spot where Great business icons and a number of Hall of Famers have joined me to dig into the stories of their success and how being a competitor made them a better leader. You'll find a number of references to episodes and interviews in this edition of Greatness.

Finally, my wonderful wife Jeanette, who has put up with the unbelievable amount of travel and the hectic schedule that comes with being married to an author and speaker, is, as always, a champ. And to my children, Will and Maddie, thank you for sharing your daddy for interviews and speeches while writing this book. And someday, when you're all grown up, I hope these stories will provide a road map to your championship lives.

Also written by Don Yaeger

Books that have appeared on The New York Times Best Seller list:

Under the Tarnished Dome: How Notre Dame Betrayed its Ideals for Football Glory (1993) – By Don Yaeger and Douglas S. Looney –
Publisher: Touchstone

Never Die Easy: The Autobiography of Walter Payton (2001) –
By Walter Payton and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Random House

Ya Gotta Believe: My Roller-Coaster Life As a Screwball Pitcher and Part-Time Father, and My Hope Filled Fight Against Brain Cancer (2004) –
By Tug McGraw and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** NAL Hardcover

It's Not About the Truth: The Untold Story of the Duke Lacrosse Scandal and the Lives it Shattered (2008) – By Don Yaeger with Mike Pressler –
Publisher: Threshold Editions

I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to the Blind Side, and Beyond –
By Michael Oher with Don Yaeger (2012) – **Publisher:** Gotham

Play it Like You Mean it: Passion, Laughs, and Leadership in the World's Most Beautiful Game (2012) – By Rex Ryan with Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Doubleday Books

Nothing to Lose, Everything to Gain: How I Went From Gang Member to Multimillionaire Entrepreneur (2013) – By Ryan Blair with Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Portfolio

George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution (2014) – By Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Penguin
Random House

Thomas Jefferson and the Tripoli Pirates: The Forgotten War That Changed American History (2015) – By Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Penguin Random House

Andrew Jackson and the Miracle of New Orleans: The Battle That Shaped America's Destiny (2017) – By Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Penguin Random House

Teammate: My Journey In Baseball and a World Series For the Ages (2017)
– By David Ross with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Hachette Books

Elevate and Dominate: 21 Ways to Win On and Off the Field (2024)
By Deion Sanders with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Simon & Schuster

All other books

When Your Back's Against the Wall: Fame, Football, and Lessons Learned Through a Lifetime of Adversity (2023) By Michael Oher with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Avery

Banana Ball: The Unbelievably True Story of the Savannah Bananas (2023) By Jesse Cole with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Penguin Books

Trial of the Century (2023) By Gregg Jarrett with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Simon & Schuster

The Road to J.O.Y.: Leading with Faith, Playing with Purpose, Leaving a Legacy (2022) By Scott Drew and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

1% Better: Reaching My Full Potential And How You Can Too (2021) – By Chris Nikic & Nik Nikic with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

Up & Down: Victories and Struggles in the Course of Life (2021) – By Bubba Watson with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

Best Seat in the House: 18 Golden Lessons from a Father to His Son (2021) By Jack Nicklaus II and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

Facing Fear: Step Out in Faith and Rise Above What's Holding You Back (2020) By Nik Wallenda with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

You Are Worth It: Building a Life Worth Fighting For (2019) By Kyle Carpenter and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Mariner Books

All the Way: My Life in Four Quarters (2019) By Joe Namath with Sean Mortimer and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Little Brown and Company

Great Teams: 16 Things High Performing Organizations Do Differently (2016) By Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

Beating Goliath: My Story of Football and Faith (2014) – By Art Briles and Don Yaeger **Publisher:** St. Martin's Griffin

Any Given Monday: Sports Injuries and How to Prevent Them for Athletes, Parents, and Coaches – Based on My Life in Sports Medicine (2014) – By Dr. James R. Andrews with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Scribner

Wish Granted: 25 Stories of Strength and Resilience from America's Favorite Athletes (2013) – By Make-A-Wish® with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** HarperOne

Starting and Closing: Perseverance, Faith, and One More Year (2013) – By John Smoltz with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** William Morrow Paperbacks

Goose: The Outrageous Life and Times of a Football Guy (2012) By Tony Siragusa with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Penguin Random House

Devoted: The Story of a Father's Love for His Son – (2012) – By Dick Hoyt with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Da Capo Press

Greatness: The 16 Characteristics of True Champions; First Edition (2011)
– By Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Center Street

Gold Medal Strategies: Business Lessons From America’s Miracle Team
(2011) – By Jim Craig and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Wiley

A Game Plan for Life: The Power of Mentoring (2011) – By John Wooden with
Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Bloomsbury USA

Never Give Up on Your Dream: My Journey (2009) – By Warren Moon with
Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Da Capo Press

Running for My Life: My Journey in the Game of Football and Beyond
(2009) – By Warrick Dunn and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** It Books

Turning of the Tide: How One Game Changed the South (2008) – By Don
Yaeger with Sam Cunningham and John Papadakis – **Publisher:** Center Street

The Senior: My Amazing Year as a 59-Year-Old College Football Linebacker
(2008) By Mike Flynt with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Thomas Nelson

**Tarnished Heisman: Did Reggie Bush Turn His Final College Season
into a Six-Figure Job?** (2008) – By Don Yaeger and Jim Henry – **Publisher:**
Pocket Books

**Sole Influence: Basketball, Corporate Greed, and the Corruption
of America’s Youth** (2000) By Dan Wetzel and Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Grand Central Publishing

This Game’s the Best! So Why Don’t They Quit Screwing With It? (1999) –
By George Karl and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** St. Martin’s Press

Pros and Cons: The Criminals Who Play in the NFL (1998) – By Jeff Benedict
and Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Grand Central Publishing

**A Shark Never Sleeps: Wheeling and Dealing with the NFL’s Most Ruthless
Agent** (1998) – By Drew Rosenhaus with Don Yaeger and Jason Rosenhaus –
Publisher: Atria Books

Living the Dream, by Dot Richardson with Don Yaeger (1997) –
Publisher: Kinsington

Tiger in a Lion’s Den: Adventures in LSU Basketball (1994) – By Dale Brown
with Don Yaeger – **Publisher:** Hyperion

Shark Attack: Jerry Tarkanian and His Battle With the NCAA and UNLV
(1993) – By Don Yaeger with Jerry Tarkanian – **Publisher:** Harper Collins

Undue Process: the NCAA’s Injustice to All (1991) – By Don Yaeger –
Publisher: Sagamore Publishing

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= INTRODUCTION =

Defining GREATNESS

“Defining greatness is perhaps even harder than achieving it.”

— JOHN WOODEN

GREATNESS. I’m fascinated by it, riveted by what allows some people to achieve at a high level for an extended period of time. What allows some to make the move from good to Great when most simply are stuck in conversation?

Of all the discussions I had with Coach Wooden while writing a book, *A Gameplan For Life*, that was released on his ninety-ninth birthday, my favorites always came back to the topic of Greatness. Who would he, the greatest coach of all time, call “great”? Why? How did he define the term? We spent hours mulling the subject. As we ultimately agreed, finding a definition for Greatness is a much bigger challenge than it might seem, and it seems that there are nearly as many definitions as there are people seeking Greatness itself.

It's something over which countless bar stool debates have raged: Who is the greatest hitter ever? Who is the greatest quarterback of all time? Which team is the greatest representation of their sport—or any sport?

After spending more than 30 years as a sports journalist, I have found myself engaged in countless “greatness” discussions with some of the most exceptional winners of our generation and the recurring impression I've had during all of them has been that we seem to be begging the question: *What is Greatness?* It seems to me that this concept must be defined first before anything else can actually be resolved.

And, truth be told, the debate over the definition of *Greatness* isn't that different from the debates over who earns the title “the greatest.” The challenge, of course, is that Greatness can't be quantified the way other things in sports can. For example, there is no debate as to whether LeBron James is the highest scorer ever in the NBA, because when he passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 38,287 points, he started rewriting the record book every time he stepped on the court; and no one can object to the fact that the 1972 Miami Dolphins hold the only perfect season in NFL history. Those are facts that aren't subject to interpretation. But does the achievement of those numbers make them the Greatest?

It seemed to me that what set the truly Great athletes apart were small, almost imperceptible things that made them dramatically different from their peers. There were incremental improvements in who they were and how they acted. These were the tiny changes, the ever-so-slight differences that gave them an edge in competition and in life.

Athletics, after all, are rife with examples of how small the difference is between good and great. Just in the past few years there have been some remarkable examples. During the 2010 NCAA men's basketball championship game, Butler University's best player, Gordon Hayward, let loose with a half-court shot at the buzzer that would have allowed his Bulldogs to beat Duke. The

shot rimmed out, and Duke claimed the title. A re-creation of Heyward's shot suggested that had it hit the backboard less than one inch from where it did, Butler would have been crowned champion in one of the great Cinderella stories of all time.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Usain Bolt of Jamaica broke American Michael Johnson's world-record time from 1996 for the 200-meter by .02 second. He defended his title four years later at the London Olympics, becoming the first man in history to defend the 100m and 200m titles. Even though Bolt retired in 2017, his record there stood well into 2023. Also in 2008, America's Michael Phelps took an extra half-stroke in the 100-meter butterfly to propel his fingertip to the wall just .01 second before Croatia's Milorad Čavić, and helped to seal his unprecedented eight gold medals in a single Games. Similarly, in the ladies' Alpine Skiing downhill event at the 2022 Beijing Olympics, Kira Weidle of Germany finished just .71 second seconds behind Switzerland's Corinne Suter—yet it was enough to make the difference between going home with the gold (Suter) and going home with no medal at all (Weidle finished fourth).

The smallest bit of extra training or effort or stamina or preparation changed everything. The small things come together to make a huge difference. But what, exactly, are those incremental changes that can impact performance so dramatically? That is much harder to nail down than concrete numbers and finishing times—because Greatness is about so much more than just professional rankings, and so much more subtle than world records or championships.

The fact that we can even debate Greatness indicates that it is something more than statistics and figures. It's a concept, an idea, a state of being—and it seems to defy a single definition in concrete terms.

Despite its abstract nature, it is still necessary to have some kind of a tangible definition of Greatness. Even if we can't boil it down to a concise sentence or two, I believe there is a workable meaning that we can use when we engage in these inevitable arguments.

Just as important is having a working definition of Greatness for our own lives—which brings us back to the original question: *What is Greatness?*

In seeking my own meaning of the term, I have found it necessary to consider a number of different aspects of Greatness—both what it is, and what it is not—and it is these attributes that can help to steer us towards a better idea of What Makes the Great Ones Great.

GREATNESS is...

GREATNESS is available to all of us.

“Excellence is a better teacher than mediocrity. The lessons of the ordinary are everywhere. Truly profound and original insights are to be found only in studying the exemplary.”

— WARREN BENNIS

(author, international corporate leadership expert, 1925–2014)

To begin, anyone seeking Greatness must understand that it is something truly unusual. Its uniqueness is part of what makes it so special—it is not something that is easily achieved because it is not something ordinary. It is available to each of us, but it is uncommon.

John Wooden once remarked to me, “If you didn’t have to work to get something, it probably wasn’t worth getting.” If Greatness were easy, it wouldn’t be Greatness—it would be the norm. Greatness reaches beyond the status quo. Greatness can be achieved only through sweat and struggle because it is not something that happens automatically. Instead, we must actively seek it through an investment of time, effort, sacrifice, discipline, and dedication to our individual pursuit. Your Greatness will be different from mine, and mine is different from Coach Wooden’s. Greatness takes a unique form for every person.

It may be uncommon, but that's not because it is impossible to achieve. Greatness is available to each one of us *if we are willing to do common things uncommonly well!* However, as we will see in the next point, what makes it so rare is that most people aren't willing to do what it takes to get there.

GREATNESS does what others will not.

"You have to be willing to do things the masses would never do; that's how you separate yourself from the masses."

— STEVE BISCIOTTI
(NFL owner)

"There are no traffic jams along the extra mile."

— ROGER STAUBACH
(NFL Hall of Fame quarterback)

"I'm not saying Earl is in a class by himself, but whatever class he's in, it don't take long to call the roll."

— BUM PHILLIPS (coach, Houston Oilers, 1923–2013)
on his running back Earl Campbell

If you were to ask a room full of people how many would be willing to make sacrifices in order to be Great, 95 percent would raise their hand, but 99 percent of those would never actually do what is necessary. The Great ones are unique because they live differently from those around them. They *are* the One Percent.

Many people will never begin the effort to change because it appears too daunting, uncomfortable, or inconvenient. Beyond just hard work, though, is the fact that Greatness recognizes opportunity, even if it presents challenges, and refuses to be intimidated by obstacles. Greatness seizes the moment.

It requires more than just muscle. Greatness demands a new way of thinking and a different perspective. It never allows itself to stagnate or grow complacent. It refuses to be put aside until a more convenient time. Greatness never rests from its quest for realization because it always sees ways to improve, room for growth, and lives to touch. It embraces the challenge rather than fleeing from it.

GREATNESS lifts—and recognizes—those around it.

“To become truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them.”

— CHARLES DE MONTESQUIEU
(French politician and philosopher, 1689–1755)

“Responsibility is the price of greatness.”

— WINSTON CHURCHILL
(British prime minister, 1874–1965)

It is essential to remember that Greatness takes others along, raising them up, inspiring and challenging them to Greater things, too. Greatness recognizes its responsibility to reach beyond itself to encourage and empower others.

Greatness does not happen in a vacuum. Even if it is practiced in private, its results are broad-reaching and impact the world in a positive manner. People who are in the presence of someone actively seeking Greatness cannot help but be inspired by their spirit, attitude, and commitment.

GREATNESS is well-rounded.

“Success at one single thing is not the same as greatness.”

— CHRIS EVERT
(American tennis Great)

An individual who truly espouses Greatness pursues it in every avenue of life. It goes beyond success and becomes a philosophy instead of just a marker. Greatness is concerned with overall improvement rather than attention on just one single skill.

Someone who swings a tennis racquet well, who jumps fastest from the starting blocks, or who wins 14 golf majors but is a failure in other aspects of his life has not achieved Greatness. Instead, Greatness strives to develop every area of one's life in order to create a whole person rather than just an individual, talented in a single pursuit.

GREATNESS has vision.

“Man’s greatness lies in his power of thought.”

— BLAISE PASCAL

(French mathematician, philosopher, and physicist, 1623–1662)

Greatness has a firm grasp on the reality of each situation—an understanding of goals and of the Big Picture. Greatness keeps things in perspective, appreciating what is truly important as well as what is trivial.

Greatness also has a long-range view of things, understanding that sacrifice in the present can mean major dividends in the future. Every workout, every obstacle—whether physical or mental—is not about the uncomfortable moment but about preparing for the ultimate goal. By viewing each situation with an eye toward opportunity and preparation, Greatness looks beyond the immediate and into the promise of the future.

GREATNESS is humble.

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble."

— HELEN KELLER
(American author, 1880–1968)

"A great man is always willing to be little."

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON
(American poet, lecturer, and essayist, 1803–1882)

Greatness is not only about raising up. It also works for the goal and not for praise, because the goal is more important than ego. True Greatness gains recognition because it has been observed by others, not advertised by the individual.

Simply believing yourself to be Great is not the same as achieving Greatness. Greatness readily accepts blame and acknowledges responsibility and ownership of a situation. It requires action and dedication, not simply patting yourself on the back.

Likewise, the Great ones acknowledge the influence of others who have helped to shape their pursuit. Teachers, coaches, mentors, families, peers—all these contribute to how a person develops in their quest for Greatness. No one achieves it alone, and the Great ones recognize this.

GREATNESS overcomes.

"The spirit, the will to win, and the will to excel, are the things that endure. These qualities are so much more important than the events that occur."

— VINCE LOMBARDI
(legendary NFL head coach and general manager, 1913–1970)

Often Greatness comes from moving beyond difficult circumstances in one's past or clearing unexpected hurdles. Other times, it is the result of challenges that were faced with determination. Whatever the case, Greatness does not make excuses—it makes progress. It recognizes that there will always be obstacles in one form or another, and it uses those challenges as a means of growing stronger and wiser.

Anyone who achieves success without a fight is probably not Great. Greatness is more than inborn ability—it is the struggle to develop and hone the skills necessary for mental and physical victory. It is not easily defeated. Giving up, throwing in the towel, surrendering without a fight are not signs of Greatness. Greatness is not a guarantee of achieving goals, but it is a guarantee of pursuing them with heart and effort.

GREATNESS is the product of choices.

*“Greatness lies, not in being strong,
but in the right using of strength.”*

— HENRY WARD BEECHER

(American abolitionist and minister, 1813–1887)

Choices, not circumstances, are what determine Greatness. It is achieved through a series of decisions that consistently tend toward the better option. Greatness lies not in what we're given, but in what we do with what we're given.

As the expression goes, “Our choices are what define us.” And we are surrounded by a multitude of choices every day, from how we spend our spare time, to the friends we choose, to what food we put in our bodies. We control our own decisions, the only area in life we can control. The Great Ones make those decisions wisely.

GREATNESS is a way of life.

"We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit."

— ARISTOTLE

(Greek philosopher, 384 BC–322 BC)

"Greatness consists in trying to be great. There is no other way."

— ALBERT CAMUS

(French philosopher and author, 1913–1960)

Working toward Greatness is a process—it isn't a one-time action. It is a developing, changing, and adapting journey, and it is cumulative. All aspects of it are necessary to achieve the overall goal, and as we hone one area of our lives to be targeted toward Greatness, we find that the other areas also become sharper and more focused.

Greatness is the persistent pursuit of professional and personal excellence. It doesn't take a day off. It is what we wake up to each morning; it is how we think and how we work; it is how we act and how we interact. Greatness is all-consuming because it is about how we live our lives, not simply what we do for a living. Greatness is more than a catchphrase or a gimmick—it is who we strive to be and, therefore, who we are.

GREATNESS is not...

Every bit as important as defining what Greatness is, is determining what it is not.

GREATNESS is not genetic.

It is not something that is the result of the gene pool; it is something that everyone must actively pursue in order to achieve. We all possess the potential for Greatness, but Greatness itself is not an inborn trait. Greatness should never be confused with talent—Greatness is what one does with his or her natural abilities, but they are not the same thing.

If you were to say to any Great athlete, “You were born great. Your mother and father set you up for your success,” every single person would balk at the suggestion. LeBron James, Patrick Mahomes, or Shohei Ohtani —anyone could point to someone of the same size, same strength, or same talent who had the same potential but not the same drive.

No one is born Great. No one is inherently Great without making a significant effort toward reaching the goal. Greatness is defined by the very struggle it requires, because the desire to be Great is the first step in achieving Greatness. It can be reached no other way.

GREATNESS is not about the record book.

It is not measured by records, rings, championships, wealth, or fame. Several years ago, my friends and co-authors Dick and Rick Hoyt were inducted into the International Iron Man Hall of Fame, even though they never won a single race. In chapter eight, we will explore what is about them that makes them worthy of such an honor.

The simple truth is that Greatness is not about winning but is something achieved only through a wholeness of self. It is directly linked to the integrity of an individual’s character and the way in which they approach their sport, profession, or life.

If your vision of personal Greatness is defined only by a statistic or a number, it is not likely to last, because there will always be someone coming along behind you who will be poised to surpass it. Greatness must be rooted in something more substantial than records.

GREATNESS does not take shortcuts.

Greatness cannot be achieved by seeking a backdoor to success. Marion Jones, who “won” five medals in the 2000 Summer Olympics, has an empty shelf where her medals used to be to prove that winning achieved through cheating counts for very little. Barry Bonds may hold the all-time home run record as well as the record for most homeruns in a season, but the BALCO drug scandal will forever taint his career. In my book, he’s not the record holder. He doesn’t deserve to be mentioned with Hank Aaron, and he certainly doesn’t qualify for the term *Great*.

So great is the quest to find the quick and easy path to Greatness that in 2020 the World Anti-Doping Agency banned all athletes representing the country of Russia from competing at the Olympics in Tokyo.

But Greatness does not seek a quick and easy solution, and it is not convenient.

Instead, Greatness understands that improvement comes only through repeated and deliberate work toward a goal. Just simply breaking a record does not make someone Great; adherence to the discipline, dedication, and rules required to get to that point is what shapes a person’s Greatness.

GREATNESS isn’t perfect.

Great players have bad games. Great people have bad days. Flaws don’t eliminate you from the pursuit of Greatness; they make you human. Everyone discussed in this book is a flawed individual, but the truly Great work through their flaws. Great ones do make mistakes.

Anyone who desires to be Great must understand that failure, disappointment, and letdowns are a part of life. The Great ones learn from those experiences and become stronger as a result. No person is whole without understanding losing as well as winning.

Perfection is impossible, but the pursuit of it allows the truly Great to thrive.

GREATNESS is not a fad.

Greatness is not defined by one moment. There are plenty of one-hit wonder bands out there, but very few true artists whose music defies generational or categorical boundaries.

In many arguments over who or what is the Greatest at something, the standards and criteria change depending upon the ideas of the moment or the tastes of the participants. Greatness is much bigger than a shifting idea based on a situational agenda. It is something whose meaning extends far beyond the immediate. It is not defined simply by current values or trends, but is proven to have staying power. It is not something that is here today and gone tomorrow. Greatness never goes out of style.

Greatness transcends the moment to be lasting and timeless.

GREATNESS is not the same as fame.

Some Great individuals never see their names in the front-page news, but through quiet actions like parenting, mentoring, teaching, and giving, they touch the lives of countless others and make their impact on the world in a manner far more lasting than fame.

Many people desire to be famous, but most are not willing to do the work required to become Great—and the difference is vast. Fame is attention gained through a person's public image. Greatness is a philosophy gained through the genuine manner in which a person lives his or her life.



A common theme of all of these ideas is not necessarily Greatness itself, but the *pursuit* of Greatness. It is in the chase of this ideal that character develops, and in that development that the habits, thoughts, and behaviors of Greatness begin to emerge. This is a “doing” list, a series of actions. The pursuit of Greatness does not happen through passivity, through wishing, or through half efforts

and shortcuts. Greatness is both the goal and by-product of its own pursuit.

This book discusses what I like to call the Sixteen Characteristics of Greatness—qualities that are present in truly Great winners but that can be translated into anyone’s life. Each chapter will focus on one aspect of Greatness, offering anecdotes, discussions, tips, inspirational quotes, and recommended reading.

Over my more than thirty years as a sports writer, I have had the opportunity to not only witness skills and moves, but also to personally ask more than 2,500 world-class athletes and coaches about the behaviors they have embraced, honed, and utilized to propel themselves forward.

When I started out, I was fascinated by what seemed to be some kind of secret formula, separating the merely talented, noteworthy, remarkable, headline-grabbing, or flashy from the ones who just seemed to have something more. It didn’t matter if they were rookies or veterans; there was just something that seemed to elevate certain athletes to a different level. It was in something they brought to their game and something they brought to their lives.

In those many interviews I found myself coming around to a few key questions over and over again: Can you name a habit that separated you from your peers, your competition? What took you from good to Great? I was determined to find the answer to one pervading question: What makes the Great ones Great?

At first, these questions were for my own benefit—ideas and tips about their individual Greatness that I would ask them for in the course of the interview; but eventually, I realized the advice I was receiving was significant in the big picture, too. Almost none of the athletes told me their success was due to their physical gifts; almost to a one, they pointed to something else. And the longer I examined these practices, the more certain patterns started to emerge, and they all seemed to fall into one of four categories: thought, preparation, work, and life.

If Great athletes past and present seem to consistently exhibit certain traits, then perhaps there is something in these ideas that

can be applied to any one of us. The next sixteen chapters will break down each category of Greatness into its individual elements, and we will examine how these characteristics can have a place in your own life.

The first step in pursuing Greatness is to consider the way you think. What are your passions? What are your beliefs? And how do you react to the situations around you? Proper mental preparation and a healthy mind-set are traits that the Great ones share. There is always emphasis on how an athlete keeps his or her body in peak physical shape, but the same is true for an athlete's mind, attitude, and spirit. Chapters one through four will guide you through these traits of mental Greatness.

- 1. It's Personal.** The Great ones hate to lose more than they love to win. Here, we will examine the intensity with which Great ones approach their profession and the personal interest they have in every loss and every move they make—with no excuses.
- 2. Rubbing Elbows.** They understand the value of association. This chapter takes a look at our “pacers”—the people around us who push us to be better. It is our responsibility to surround ourselves with the very best people, those who can push us, challenge us and encourage us.
- 3. Believe.** They have faith in a higher power. Many famous athletes today seem to worship at the altar of self. But there are others who understand that life is so much more than personal gain and glory, that talents and opportunities are blessings, and that moral grounding and strong faith are essential elements in creating a well-rounded, healthy person.
- 4. Contagious Enthusiasm.** They are positive thinkers. They are enthusiastic, and that enthusiasm rubs off on those around them. They aren't just optimists; they are encouragers who motivate their teammates to victory.

The second step in attaining Greatness is to examine the way you prepare. Are you directing your energy and resources to the right places? Are you working toward the winner's circle or just the finishing line? Preparation is more than just practice—it is precise, measured effort that is goal-oriented and motivated for success. The Great ones are always ready to rise to the occasion and they never lose sight of what they are working toward. The next four chapters will challenge you to approach preparation in a new and more effective way.

5. Hope for the Best, But... The Great ones prepare for all possibilities before they step onto the field. They anticipate needs and keep themselves relevant so that when their opportunity comes, they can calmly step in and do what needs to be done—because they've already prepared for it.

6. What Off-Season? They are always working toward the next game. They understand that the goal is what's ahead, and that there's *always* something ahead. These athletes refuse to back off from their training because they know there is always someone waiting on the bench who will be happy to fill their shoes. Because of this, they push themselves to grow, stretch, hone, and continually develop.

7. Visualize Victory. They see victory before the game begins. They refuse to entertain the possibility of defeat but, rather, see themselves as winners with the ability to succeed again and again. Rather than allowing themselves to get distracted by unimportant things, they direct their energy and resources toward the positive goals they have set.

8. Inner Fire. They use adversity as fuel. Some people use difficulties as an excuse to fail, but the Great ones use it as a springboard to propel them forward. It's a lot easier to achieve success when things are comfortable, but what about when they

turn upside down? Rather than allowing themselves to be held back, the truly Great use adversity to take them some place they wouldn't otherwise go.

No victory can be gained without effort, and the third step toward Greatness is to look at how you approach your work. How do you handle the prospect of failure? How adaptable are you to changing circumstances? How do you relate to the rest of your team? An athlete's profession is their sport, and the principles that the Great ones use to dictate their approach to competition are applicable to any job field. Chapters nine through 12 encourage a closer look at how you take on your professional pursuits.

- 9. Ice in Their Veins.** The Great ones are risk takers and don't fear making a mistake. They have to contend with fears and nerves like anyone else, but they refuse to be controlled by them. Rather, they force themselves to charge on.
- 10. When All Else Fails.** They know how—and when—to adjust their game plan. Instead of stubbornly refusing to change when the conditions change, the Great ones will tweak their technique or modify their methods to adapt to their circumstance.
- 11. The Ultimate Teammate.** They will assume whatever role is necessary for the team to win. Placing the needs of their teammates above their own desires or preferences, they are willing to take on different responsibilities in order to positively affect the desired outcome of their team's aspirations.
- 12. Not Just About the Benjamins.** They don't play just for the money. The Great ones recognize that there is more to the game than which team will write them the biggest check. They make decisions based on what will be best for the people around them, for supporting the organization, and for achieving the ultimate goal.

The final step in reaching Greatness is to live your life in a way that reflects Greatness. How do you interact with those around you? What do you do with your success? Where do you look for fulfillment? What do you consider your Greatest accomplishment? Achieving Greatness means having a ready answer to these questions thanks to a life dedicated to something bigger than yourself.

For winners, that means being able to appropriately handle the pressures placed upon them by fame and recognizing the importance of staying grounded. For the rest of us, it means developing our personal side apart from our work, cultivating a life lived for something Greater than the bottom line, and setting goals for things more important than our professional pursuits. The final four chapters of this book examine the way in which a life—not just a career—can be truly Great.

13. Do Unto Others. They know character is defined by how they treat those who cannot help them, so they dedicate a portion of their time and resources to enriching their communities and giving back to those in need.

14. When No One Is Watching. They are comfortable in front of the mirror and they live their lives with integrity. They incorporate their values in every aspect of their lives, from the playing field to the home—not because the eyes of the world are upon them, but because it is the right thing to do.

15. When Everyone Is Watching. They embrace the idea of being a role model. Whether they chose it or not, athletes are some of the most visible mentors in our society. While some use this notoriety for material gain or as an excuse for reckless behavior, the Great ones recognize the responsibility they have to their fans and to the next generation.

16. Records Are Made to Be Broken. They know their legacy isn't what they did on the field. They are well-rounded. While their career is obviously a huge part of who they are, they have

also recognized that there are some things, like family, faith, and community, that are more important and last longer than a few seasons on top. The Great ones work to cultivate these relationships and associations in order to develop their full selves.



The thing that makes the Great ones Great cannot be boiled down to one simple idea, catchy mantra, or trick of the trade. It is the realization and daily pursuit of each of these characteristics that helps an individual—athlete, career person, parent, friend—truly achieve Greatness. It is within reach for all of us. Let yourself become one of the Great ones.

P I L L A R

ONE

How
They
Think

CHAPTER

1

It's Personal

**The truly great hate to lose
more than they love to win.**

The only person with any expectations of the 38-year-old entered in the U.S. Open tennis tournament was himself. No one else thought the man who'd been ranked at No. 947 in the world the year before had a chance to win. He'd earned a wild-card bid to the tournament, which meant the world to him.

The aged underdog faced a top-10 player in the first round, 25-year-old Patrick McEnroe, the younger brother of John McEnroe. The elder player lost the first two sets and the first three games of the third set. He was down love-40, serving, and literally just moments away from being swept out of the tournament.

With everything in his favor, a calm McEnroe waited for the serve. He was relaxed and lackadaisical, and then he did something that would change the course of that evening: he yawned.

Across the net, the 38-year-old could not believe his eyes. Insulted, he swore under his breath, “I am not going to let that kid beat me.”

He came back to win the third set 6–4; then went on to win the fourth set 6–2. After four hours and 20 minutes of play, he won the fifth set—and the match.

“In the old days I used to win a lot because of my reputation,” said the underdog named Jimmy Connors, who was one of the most competitive people ever to play the sport. “I’m not 24 or 25 years old now. But there’s been a pattern that developed over my career that you have to kill me to beat me.”

When another fighter named Rafael Nadal turned pro in the year 2001, he was determined to become one of the best players in the world. Mind you, this was at a time when the world already had a “best” in a guy named Roger Federer. But the sixteen-year-old Spaniard entered the ATP with strong willpower and a boat load of ambition. But he always had a strong sense of what it took to become Great, saying, “Well, I guess it would be to go as far as I can, to become a great tennis player. I just have to keep working hard every day. I know it won’t be easy.... There’s so much high-level competition out there.”

At first, when he played in tournaments, he worried that because he was younger than everyone else, he thought they must be better than him. Once he got on court, however, his winner’s mindset took over.

“Because I’m a fighter and I really hate losing, things tend to level out,” he noted. They did quite a bit more than level out. Within four years of his youthful debut, Nadal won his first Grand Slam trophy by beating—and *not losing to*—Mariano Puerta 6–7, 6–3, 6–1, 7–5 to win the men’s singles tennis title at the 2005 French Open.

It was the first of his 22 Grand Slam titles running through 2023.

More from the Truly Great

Hating to lose was certainly a defining trait of legendary college football coach Bear Bryant. A few years ago, I had the opportunity

to work on a book about Coach Bryant and the University of Alabama football program, interviewing people all over the country who had known him—old coaching buddies, friends, family members, and scores of former athletes who played football under this remarkable man. I asked them all what made him so successful, and time and again, the answer was the same, simple truth: “He hated to lose more than he liked to win.”

His drive toward excellence was contagious; it spread to his fellow coaches and on to his players. Bryant’s desire to lead his teams to victory was so great that under his leadership, the Crimson Tide earned six National Championships and thirteen conference championships. When Bryant retired in 1982, he was the winningest head coach in college football history.

“Losing doesn’t make me want to quit,” Bryant once said. “It makes me want to fight that much harder.”

It really stood out to me that those who knew him best all attributed Bryant’s success not to an elaborate formula of coaching secrets but to the very simple fact that he hated to lose, and he cared enough to invest himself into the pursuit of Greatness.

The work it takes to win may hurt, but losing hurts even more.



Perhaps one of the best examples of making it personal took place on Saturday, April 18, 1981, in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Two minor-league teams, the Pawtucket Red Sox and the Rochester Red Wings, battled it out over 33 innings.

Technically, the game should have ended at 1:00 a.m. on Sunday, but the umpires were unaware of the League’s ruling on when to call a game in such extraordinary circumstances—so they kept on until 4:07 a.m., 32 innings in, with a score of 2–2. Finally, the League president, over the phone, called the game to a halt and ruled that it would be resumed when the teams were next scheduled to play at Pawtucket in June. On June 23, in what was technically the 33rd inning of the game, Pawtucket managed to pull

ahead 3–2 and clinch the win in a marathon game that lasted eight hours twenty-five minutes.

Each team wanted the game to be over, but neither wanted to be the one to call it quits. Both teams cared enough to keep plugging away, tied inning after tied inning, until one was the clear victor. For all the players, managers, coaches—and even the 19 die-hard fans who stayed until 4:07 a.m. on April 19—the game wasn’t just a game. It was a testament to the passion and drive that each team shared to never throw in the towel.

It’s even more significant when you realize that in that match-up, officially the longest professional baseball game ever played, Wade Boggs was playing for Pawtucket and Cal Ripken Jr. was playing for Rochester. Both men, future Hall of Fame major leaguers, were part of that intense determination not to be the team that walked away from the game with a loss.

“We were now in uncharted territory. We wondered what was going to happen next,” Ripken recounted in his book *Get in the Game*. “We were having fun again. And make no mistake about it, as time wore on, we really wanted to win that game.”

And, true to his character of relentless energy and hard work, Cal Ripken Jr. played every single one of those 33 innings. *And* he was the first player to show up for the team’s next game, which was played the very same afternoon following the marathon.

“I never even considered not showing up. I wanted to play that afternoon game,” Ripken recalled. “A lot of my teammates felt exactly the same way.”

In the buildup to the 2023 Western Conference Final between the NFL’s Kansas City Chiefs and Cincinnati Bengals, the Bengals faithful decided to do some very public trash talking. Even the Cincinnati mayor, Aftab Pureval, got into the act by facetiously suggesting that Bengals quarterback Joseph Lee Burrow, who was 3-0 against the Chiefs’ quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, might just be Mahomes’s real biological father—in other words, his *daddy*. Bengal fans began referring to the Chiefs’ Arrowhead Stadium as Burrowhead Stadium.

The Chiefs turned this bit of playful disrespect into the basis of a monolithic “chip” they burnished to a fine gloss. Travis Kelce, one of Mahomes’ favorite targets, announced to the news media, “I got some wise words for that Cincinnati mayor: know your role and shut your mouth, you jabroni,” a word roughly translating to “loser.”

After beating the Bengals 23-20, Mahomes grabbed a mic and yelled out to the fans still celebrating in the stands, “Is this Arrowhead?!!!” And proceeded to tell his interviewer that the win was gratifying because “only five percent of the public believed we could win.”

That figure remains highly debatable to this day, as does the likelihood that Mayor Pureval’s snark truly fazed Kelce and Mahomes to any marked degree. But what often separates good competitors from the great ones is the ability to reach deep into their magic bag of motivational hacks and manufacture a fierce chip on the shoulder where none ought to exist.



Duke basketball, no question, is synonymous with Greatness. In talking to Mike Krzyzewski, the Blue Devil’s head coach from 1980 to 2022, I asked him when he knew he carried his team to the level of Greatness, fully expecting the answer to be a pivotal game or event during one of the five seasons he coached the Blue Devils through March Madness to the national title. “Coach K” surprised me when he told me Greatness began at the end of his third season at Duke.

At the end of that season (in which they had a losing record) they had to face nationally No. 2 ranked Virginia in the tournament. The Cavaliers pummeled Duke, 109–66, embarrassing the Blue Devils badly on television. After the game, Krzyzewski stood, staring at the scoreboard, then finally left the arena to meet some booster friends for a late meal. As he arrived at the restaurant, he noticed someone laughingly pulling the knives off the table, just in case the coach took the loss too hard.

After sitting down, one of the boosters raised a glass of water in a toast. “Here’s to a night let’s soon forget,” he said. But that was not what Krzyzewski wanted.

Shaking his head, he looked at the boosters and said no, that was the wrong toast. Coach K then lifted his own glass and corrected it: “To a night we’ll *never* forget.”

That 2:00 a.m. toast illustrated the Greatness of Coach Krzyzewski. He had taken an underdog Duke team into the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament and gotten humiliated by one of the best teams in the nation—but he didn’t make excuses for the loss. He used it to build a better team.

At the team’s first practice the following year, Coach K walked out onto the court and turned on the scoreboard, illuminating the 109–66 reminder and stinging loss. He accepted no excuses and used the losing game as a teaching moment. He wanted the Blue Devils to remember the sting of the loss and how badly it had hurt to walk off the court. And that year, the team won thirteen more games. Two years later, Duke played for the National Championship with Coach K behind the bench.

He used a humiliating loss on television as a springboard for improvement. “It was that loss, and turning the energy from that loss and remembering the pain that came from losing like that allowed us to become a more successful program,” Krzyzewski explained.



Serena Williams was a perfectionist long before she was a serious competitor on the tennis court.

“When I was 5 years old and in kindergarten, we had a project due and I was up late working on it, so late that my mom had to force me to go to bed,” she told me in an interview. “But I kept getting back up because I wanted to redo the project until it was 100 percent perfect. Eventually, I fell asleep and didn’t get it done because I wanted it to be perfect more than I wanted to just get it done.”

Her work has always been a point of personal pride, a trait that

is reflected in her impressive career. By 2015, she had been the top-ranked player, according to the Women's Tennis Association, on six separate occasions, and had won twenty-one Grand Slams: one win at the French Open; three at the U.S. Open; four at the Australian Open; and four at Wimbledon.

While she used to lose her temper and lash out when she lost a match, she learned to channel that personal disappointment and frustration into a much more constructive outlet. "I don't like it, and what I do is go home and practice harder. I work harder. I train harder. When I step on that practice court in the days after a loss, I have an anger in me. It is subconscious. I don't mean to be that way. But now I use that anger to make me better. It propels me to work harder."

When she retired from tennis in 2022, Williams had won 23 grand slam singles titles and 14 grand slam doubles titles as the undisputed Greatest ever in women's tennis.

And for the Truly Great in Business

Hating to lose is a philosophy that fuels many top business leaders as well. The National Retail Federation studies trends in sales and found that 48 percent of all salespeople will make one call and quit if the answer is no. That's almost half who quit after one setback.

When the rest of the people called back, another quarter gave up after getting a second no. Fifteen percent more got three no's and abandoned the potential sale. Just 12 percent continued to call until they got the results they wanted.

The NRF's study didn't stop there. It analyzed the sales figures, which showed that the 12 percent who didn't accept losing accounted for 80 percent of total sales. A full 88 percent of sales staff gave in to defeat, but the persistent staff—the ones who made it personal—not only closed the deal, but are the Great ones who are overall responsible for their company's success.

Stanley Bing, in his best seller, *Sun Tzu Was a Sissy*, writes, "In battle, attitude is all. And true warriors are united in the fact that they hate to lose even more than they love to win." In many work

environments, second place is termed the “first loser”—a term many leaders acknowledge but struggle to accept. Other leaders see second place as a “tie for last.”

Second place is not even on their radar screens. Roberto Goizueta, former CEO of Coca-Cola, summarized it this way: “I hate to lose...I’d rather not play.”

George Kurtz, the founder and CEO of CrowdStrike and, more recently, a race car driver on the Sports Car Club circuit, says that when hiring people, he looks for people who are hungry and gritty and hate to lose. “I have a question I always ask people I interview: ‘What drives you more, the will to win or hating to lose?’” he said. “Everybody wants to win, when you look across all of sports, it’s the people who hate to lose who are the most driven.”

Many executives admit that the “love to win—hate to lose” mentality is based on expectations and intensity of pleasure versus pain. The “can’t win ’em all” attitude, common in many sporting events, simply does not resonate with CEOs who expect nothing less than 100 percent victory.

The thought of coming in second place—or worse—has led many business leaders to share former Cincinnati Reds and Detroit Tigers manager Sparky Anderson’s opinion that “losing hurts more than winning feels good.” Hating to lose in business settings takes on additional significance for company leaders. If Brooks Koepka loses his focus and finishes second at the Masters (as he did in 2023), there is another opportunity to win right around the corner with the next tournament, next match, or next game. Koepka showed this by winning his third PGA Championship a little over a month after losing to Jon Rahm at Augusta National.

But business is not as forgiving, as coming in second place can send shock waves, perhaps even leading to a company’s ruin. According to Sam Simon, chairman and CEO of Atlas Oil, “I hate to lose. That in itself is a great motivator. I also love what I do and have 192 people working for me who I don’t want to let down.”

Business leaders hate to lose just as badly as athletes do. For many, the potential for losing business and changing the livelihoods

of thousands of valued employees is the Greatest motivator—and the one that requires the most work.

After booming to become the nation's third-largest pizza chain, John Schnatter, the "Papa" in Papa John's Pizza, nearly had to close one thousand stores. But Schnatter, who hated the thought of losing franchises, studied the chain's losing ways. He realized they'd gotten away from the fundamentals of the business. "The one thing that Papa John's had that was solid was that people thought we had a better pizza," he told a reporter. "So we focused on that."

He hated losing so much he was willing to go back and pore over every mistake the company ever made to never lose again.

The GREATNESS Challenge

You may never be Jimmy Connors or Raphael Nadal, two of the most competitive athletes in the history of tennis; you may never be Bear Bryant, one of the winningest coaches in the history of college football; you may never be in situations like Cal Ripken Jr., Patrick Mahomes or Serena Williams—but you will certainly have the opportunity to bring the pursuit of excellence to your office, your family, and your life.

You will lose, but how you react to that loss and what you learn from it will demonstrate your level of greatness. Will you accept it, or will you hate it?

How do you handle the prospect of loss? Do you hang up after the first rejection and not try again? Does it mire you in a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat? Take some time to honestly assess the ways you deal with losing. Sam Walton, former CEO of Walmart and once the richest man in the world, was fond of saying, "I expect to win. I go into tough challenges always planning to come out victorious. It never occurred to me that I might lose, it was almost as if I had a right to win. Thinking like that often seems to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy." Champions expect to win; why shouldn't you?

Think about the last time you finished second—or worse—in something that was meaningful to you. What was your reaction? Did you explain it away somehow, or did you commit yourself to work harder?

When you lose—and you will—don't make excuses. Figure out a better way to approach the same situation when you encounter it again, and prepare for it. Sportswriter Bob Nightengale once asked pitching great Greg Maddux about the most memorable batting situation he'd faced. Maddux, known for his excellence in preparing for each situation, didn't cite a famous slugger or pennant-chasing circumstance. Maddux, an eight-time All Star with four Cy Young awards, eighteen Gold Glove awards, and a World Series championship, said his most memorable situation had been striking out Dave Martinez to end a regular-season game.

Perplexed, Nightengale asked why. Maddux said, "I remember that one because he got a hit off me in the same situation (full count, bases loaded, two out in the ninth inning) seven years earlier. I told myself if I ever got in the same situation again, I'll pitch him differently. It took me seven years, but I got him." The odds were against Maddux meeting Martinez in that exact same situation again, let alone pitch to the same count again, but Maddux had been beaten before and lost. His hatred of failure in the previous matchup drove him to success when he encountered it again.

No matter how small the loss is, learn something from it. Six-time NBA champion Michael Jordan hates to lose at anything—even a charity basketball event. Even if no one knows about the loss except Jordan and the person who bested him, Jordan mulls it over for days, trying to figure how he could have prevented it. "I hate to lose at anything I do," he said. "It doesn't matter what the stakes, or who the audience is." Most people might blow it off as something inconsequential, but Jordan cares enough about the small battles to make them personal. When you come in second, don't justify it. Challenge yourself to work harder.

Do you care enough to make it personal? Does the desire to win with honor steer you to continually strive towards victory? Hating to lose is not bad sportsmanship—it means that you have a drive to succeed and hate to fall short of your best.

The pursuit of Greatness is an inherently personal one; do you care enough to make it your own?

CHAPTER

2

Rubbing Elbows

**The great ones understand
the value of association.**

John Wooden is the Greatest coach of all time. It is tough in the world of sports to make any statement that declarative, but in this case I can. Besides being a man of impeccable character and a mentor to thousands, he was an incredibly gifted and insightful leader. Over the last twelve years that he was the head coach at UCLA, he guided the Bruins men's basketball team to an unbelievable ten national championships. That is among the few records in men's sports I feel comfortable will never be broken.

So when Coach Wooden offered advice on what made the Great ones Great, the lesson was sure to be a valuable one. When I asked that question a few years ago, Coach explained to me that among the most important things he looked for when trying to get a sense

of a person's capacity for success was who that person included in their inner circle. "Their associations told me everything I needed to know about them," Coach said. "I could tell what their future held by how important it was to surround themselves with the right people."

To illustrate his point, Coach said he wanted to share the story of "one of the best players I've ever coached." I immediately assumed I was about to hear about a legendary Bruin like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or Bill Walton. Instead, Coach smiled and said: "Do you know about Swen Nater?" I did not.

Nater was born in Holland and raised in an orphanage there before immigrating to the United States at the age of 9 to grow up in Southern California. It might have appeared he was destined for basketball because of his great height—he would eventually grow to seven feet tall—but he was too gangly and awkward to even make his high school's team.

His body matured and he got a second shot at playing basketball competitively, this time at a small community college not far from his home. Over the next two years, Swen Nater went from a boy who couldn't make the high school team to one of the best junior-college basketball players in the country. He quickly drew the interest of a number of four-year colleges that hoped to add Nater as the star player on their roster for his final two years of eligibility.

As Nater was weighing offers from those schools, his coach at Cypress Creek Community College suggested he not make any decision until they could talk to John Wooden. Swen laughed at the unlikely prospect of playing for the Bruins, who had just won their fifth consecutive national championship. But he listened as his coach phoned Wooden and made one of the Great sales calls of all time.

"It appears you have one scholarship left for next year," the Cypress Creek coach said to Wooden. "And I have your player sitting right here."

Wooden asked why he was so confident and the other coach replied in a rather gutsy way, "Coach Wooden, here's your problem:

as I look at your roster, you have one of the best players in the country starting at center for you next year, Bill Walton. But what you don't have is anyone big enough to compete against Bill Walton... in practice! You need *my* big guy to make *your* big guy work harder every day to get better."

Coach Wooden got the point immediately: Walton would improve more rapidly if he had better competition every day. What he needed to push him to his full potential was someone who could match him and drive him forward. Walton, Nater, the Bruins—they would all be made better if these two men chose to associate themselves with one another, if they chose to make each other a key part of the other's inner circle.

The value of association—it made sense to John Wooden, and after the pitch from Cypress Community College, he offered Nater his last remaining scholarship to play at UCLA.

The scholarship came with an understanding, however. Nater was told he'd probably seldom make it off the bench during games; however, he would have the opportunity to practice each and every day with the best players and best coaches in the nation.

Nater didn't wait a second before he signed that scholarship, and as John Wooden promised, he rarely played in games and certainly never started. But he mattered.

When Bill Walton, as a senior, was poised to be the first choice overall in the NBA draft, all of the scouts and reporters seemed to want to know one thing: who did the best guy think was the best guy *he'd* ever had to play against?

He didn't look across town to Pepperdine or across the country to Kansas. Bill Walton looked down the bench and said "that guy down there"—Swen Nater—was the best competition he'd faced.

Nater, who played with heart and drive and passion and soul, had grown every day as a player at UCLA because he had understood the importance of training against the best and surrounding himself with greatness. This no-name athlete with almost no playing time became the first-ever first-round NBA draft pick who never started a senior college game.

John Wooden agreed with Walton: the best ones are those people who can recognize the strengths of others, as well as their own weaknesses. They surround themselves with excellence and accept the challenge to propel themselves forward to greater things.

Wooden treasured this story because he understood that the value of association is the first step to achieving greatness. Despite not starting a single college game, Swen Nater went on to play 12 years in the NBA and is now an Executive at Costco. And the admiration is reciprocal: Nater says that to this day, associating himself with John Wooden and Bill Walton was the best decision he ever made.

More from the Truly Great

The value of association can take several forms. Think, for a moment, about how different kinds of challenges and associations helped other athletes realize their Greatness.

Wilma Rudolph's inspiring story of Greatness illustrates the impact that association can have on pushing individuals beyond themselves. Struck with polio at age 4, the doctors told Wilma's parents that she would never walk without assistance again. Her mother tirelessly helped her daughter regain the use of her legs by researching home remedies and massaging the muscles to keep them from total atrophy. She repeatedly promised her daughter that together they would beat the disease and shed the braces.

Her mother's efforts were monumental, but the thing that really inspired young Wilma to keep going was watching her older sister play basketball. After watching her sister from the sidelines for several years, 12-year-old Wilma decided that walking wasn't just enough—she was going to reach beyond that. She was going to be an athlete.

Just four years later, at 16, Wilma Rudolph won a spot on the U.S. Olympic track-and-field team and brought home a bronze medal for the 4×100-meter relay at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. Four years later, at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, she won three more track-and-field medals, breaking an Olympic record for the

100-meter dash and setting a new world record with her teammates for the 4×100 relay—and all because she had felt a push to reach for something more.

Simply the presence of the right people—some who encourage and some who challenge through example—can be the force that makes people work for goals far beyond what they ever thought possible.

If surrounding yourself with the right people can help lift us Greatness, the obverse also holds true: rubbing elbows with the wrong crowd can hurt you. Take the troubling case of Memphis Grizzlies player Ja Morant. In Morant’s first season in the NBA, he earned NBA All-Rookie First Team honors. He seemed destined for stardom. Three years later, he found himself suspended from the league for 25 games for displaying a gun at a nightclub and on social media.

Not surprisingly, the company Morant keeps became a major focus of attention, leading the NBA great Kevin Garnett to offer some older brotherly advice to Morant. “You don’t get to pick and choose when you wanna be a professional, young fella,” Garnett said. “You gotta do better. You gotta put yourself *around* better to *do* better.”

Will the young *fella* follow Garnett’s excellent advice? Let’s hope so because it could spell the difference between Morant achieving Greatness or ignominy.



The Romanian gymnast Nadia Comăneci had no equals on her native team. Easily sweeping numerous national awards before she hit her teenage years, it was in preparation for the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal that she faced her stiffest competition in the form of Soviet gymnast Nellie Kim.

Coming in second place to Kim in vault, floor, and uneven bars in pre-Olympic qualifying, Comăneci used the challenge to attack her training and performance at the Games with a new level of ferocity. It paid off. At just 14 years of age, Comăneci earned a per-

fect 10 for her routine on the uneven bars, making her the first person to ever achieve that honor in modern Olympic history. She remains the youngest woman ever to do so, and she earned it in a category where she had lost to her stiffest competition in the preliminaries.

Nadia Comăneci was clearly an athlete who understood the importance of having a challenger. It was the ongoing rivalry between Comăneci and Kim that would spur both of them on to earn numerous perfect 10s and countless honors for the next five years. But the distinction of being the very first perfect 10—and the association of her name with such an outstanding accomplishment—remains with Comăneci.

Have you ever noticed how Great athletes often seem to emerge in groups? It's not a coincidence. The presence of other Great athletes challenges each one to become even better.

Think about the so-called Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who dominated the Notre Dame backfield in the 1920s. Quarterback Harry Stuhldreher, halfbacks Jim Crowley and Don Miller, and fullback Elmer Layden were a force the likes of which college football had never seen before. Of course their combined talent made playing time that much tougher, but the presence of other fierce competitors forced each one to stay on top of his game.

Consider, too, the famous friendship and rivalry between Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. Each man benefited from the talent of the other in challenging his own hitting. They were able to use that competition to not only improve their own game but also to propel their shared team, the New York Yankees, to consecutive World Series victories in 1961 and 1962. Not coincidentally, these are the same years that saw the height of both men's pursuit of Babe Ruth's home-run record.

Venus and Serena Williams have used their sisterly rivalry to push each other to greatness. Their performance at Wimbledon in 2008 illustrates this point perfectly. Together they made a formidable pair on the court, winning the women's doubles competition. But they also both channeled their talent and competitive spirit

to outplay the other, as they battled through the rankings to face one another in the finals, in which Venus won her fifth Wimbledon women's singles title. The presence of the other sister as both a friend and rival has encouraged each to grow as an athlete until both are among the world's best.



Prior to the Williams sisters' rise to Greatness, rivals Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert dominated women's tennis throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They faced each other eighty times in professional play, sixty-one of those matches played in tournament finals. Bud Collins, famed sportscaster and journalist for professional tennis, called theirs "The rivalry of the century."

Evert and Navratilova each hold 18 Grand Slam victories in the singles division, currently fourth on the all-time highest list of career Grand Slam players in the open era. From November of 1975 through August of 1987, either Navratilova or Evert ranked No. 1 in all but twenty-three weeks, and most of the time, the other ranked No. 2. Of the eighty matches where they faced each other, Navratilova won 43 and Evert won 37.

On their quest for Greatness, Evert and Navratilova propelled each other to sports history. Navratilova encapsulated their rivalry and camaraderie by saying, "There never will be another Chris and Martina show. There never was another like it, and there never will be another."



Well ... never say never. As great as the Evert-Navratilova rivalry was, no rivalry in any sport could be said to have surpassed that of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, who dominated the opening decades of the twenty-first century by racking up 66 grand slams among them. All played or are playing at the highest level well into their thirties.

Their styles of play are as different as the men themselves. Before his retirement in 2022, Federer was considered a “classic” player who was known for the artistry of his shot making, while Nadal, now “inactive,” relied on the power and ferocity of his play. Like Nadal, Djokovic is a more emotional and, sometimes, even fiery athlete who is not above playing mind games with his opponents or smashing a racquet, but whose timing has earned him a reputation as the greatest returner of serve since Andre Agassi.

To love professional tennis is to choose a style we prefer to watch. It is probably one we prefer to emulate in our own game as well.

Tennis buffs love to compare their records against one another, but I prefer to listen to how each viewed the others’ impact on his own development and standard of play. One thing seems clear: Great rivalries are not based on hate. Show me two competitors flipping each other the bird across the net, and I’ll show you a hate-fest, not a rivalry, whose chief emotion seems to be one of ... appreciation.

“When Roger leaves the tour, yeah, an important part of my life is leaving too because all the moments he has been next or in front me in important moments of my life,” an emotional Rafael Nadal said after Federer announced his intention of retiring.

“We have been very connected, especially the last 10 years,” returned Federer. “I can call up Rafa and talk about anything, I hope he feels the same way.”

Great rivalries differ from bromances, a point Djokovic underscores when he told a reporter from *Corriere della Sera* that he and Nadal “have never been friends—between rivals you can’t—but we have never been enemies. I have always respected and admired him a lot. Thanks to him and Federer I grew up and became who I am.”

Great rivalries reveal a sneaky calculus: if you’re the favorite and enjoying pole position in the media and your own mind, ignore it like grim death. Conversely, if you’re the underdog and constantly being reminded of all the reasons that this probably isn’t going to

be your year because your rival is just too good, ignore it like grim death. Use the received but faulty wisdom to energize your preparation, remembering that great rivalries have a habit of messing up the calculus of competition in surprising and wonderful ways, raising underdogs to the status of superheroes and bringing down the mighty.

Great rivalries are like stock picks: past performance does not predict future results. The reason for this phenomenon is that great rivalries come to define the two rivals and make both of them better. If one of the rivals ceases to define himself by the rivalry and continually improves to come out on top, an imbalance occurs and one of the parties outgrows the other.

Then, the rivalry ceases to be.

That explains why in an interview with CNN's Becky Anderson, Djokovic dug down a bit deeper to the essence of his rivalry with Federer and Nadal. "They made me stronger, both mentally, physically," he told her. "My game improved because of all these matches that we played against each other, mostly because of the matches that I lost to them—some big matches."



In 1955, Igor Larionov jump-started his NHL career in Detroit, where Coach Scotty Bowman acted on the idea to team up the Russian legend with his fellow countrymen Sergei Fedorov and Slava Kozlov on offense, and Slava Fetisov and Vladimir Konstantinov on defense. "Four Russian guys alongside you, of course to make your job easier," Larionov said.

Normally, offensive players have two linemates and two defensemen skate in pairs, but although it was commonplace for the players' Red Army team back in their homeland, Bowman was the first NHL coach to use a five-man unit. The success of the "Russian Five" illustrates how common background, values, and training can help the greater goal.

"Finally, I had a chance to play the style I was taught to play

in Russia, with a team that could win the Stanley Cup, a team that played puck possession, with skating and creativity. Those were unbelievable years,” Larionov remarked before his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame. “I was proud to be a part of that team.”

All kids who lace up their skates dream of eclipsing Wayne Gretzky’s unbelievable 215 points in one season. They may not ever get close to it, but it’s the challenge looming out there that makes them try. Athletes who set their sights on records to beat understand the value of association.



I once spent some time catching up with one of the great “football families,” the Mannings: Archie and Olivia, and their sons Cooper, Peyton, and Eli. The result of this fascinating visit was another pretty impressive lesson in the power of association.

Archie had no intention of starting a football dynasty. A highly successful quarterback at Ole Miss, he went on to play in the NFL for thirteen years, including ten seasons with the New Orleans Saints. As a result, his three sons grew up around football and developed an innate love for the gridiron, even though their dad never pushed them in that direction. The competitive bug must have been in their blood, though, because no matter what activity the family shared, it always became a fight to the finish.

Even shooting hoops in the driveway was an epic battle. “As their father, you don’t want to let them just win, but you do want them to feel like they can compete,” Archie laughed. “When the games got close, we’d have trouble finishing a game to 20 because by the time you get to 18, no one’s going to get a shot off. They’d hack at you to keep you from scoring. A competitive nature is something they all had.”

That nature served all three boys well.

Cooper, the oldest Manning son, earned all-state honors as a wide receiver in high school. His senior year he played on the same team as his younger brother, Peyton. The two were a force to be

reckoned with on the field; Peyton always looked first to his brother, and Cooper almost always managed to get open to catch the pass. Their years of competing against each other had helped them hone their instincts for how to read each other, as well.

Cooper was offered a football scholarship at Ole Miss, but during his freshman year it was discovered that he suffered from a narrowing of the spine, an extremely serious medical condition that would end his athletic career. Instead of mourning his own unfortunate situation, however, Cooper channeled his competitive spirit into his brothers' efforts, cheering them on and pushing them to keep working.

Peyton went on to play quarterback for the University of Tennessee, where he became the school's all-time leading passer and set the Southeastern Conference's record for career wins, was named First Team All-American and received numerous other prestigious awards. He was selected as the No. 1 overall pick in the 1998 draft by the Indianapolis Colts, whom he led to two Super Bowls, besides setting numerous records and being voted NFL MVP an unprecedented five times. After missing the 2011 season with the Colts due to a neck injury, Peyton Manning moved on to play for the Denver Broncos, quarterbacking them to a Super Bowl victory over the Carolina Panthers on February 7, 2016.

Eli, younger than Peyton by five years, also had an outstanding college career. As quarterback for Ole Miss, he set or tied forty-five separate records, earned numerous national awards, and was the No. 1 overall draft pick when he went pro. In Super Bowl XLII and Super Bowl XLVI, Eli led his team, the New York Giants, to beat the New England Patriots in both games, and he earned MVP honors for both performances.

Even as professionals, the Manning men check on the others' teams after every Sunday game and call each other that evening to discuss how they played that day. Cooper, now a partner at an energy investment firm, calls both his brothers during the week and joins them and their father at the Manning Passing Academy, a summer football camp for high school players held each year at

Nicholls State College in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Now retired, Peyton and Eli host Monday Night Football with Peyton and Eli on ESPN.

The special bond that these men share comes from more than just being a family. By challenging one another and competing all their lives, they have helped to propel each other forward toward not only outstanding careers with their respective teams or companies but also toward Greatness in terms of their personal lives. Following the example set by their parents, the second generation of Mannings in the spotlight has a reputation for being intelligent, personable, down-to-earth, and charitable to the community. In a lot of ways, no one wanted to be the first Manning labeled as a troublemaker—their competitive spirit helped keep them on the straight and narrow, both on the field and off.

And for the Truly Great in Business

The value of association is a huge motivator in the business world, as well. Consider just a few examples of how major corporations benefited from understanding the powerful motivation competition can provide.

Most people enjoying their meal at one of Chick-fil-A's 2,600 locations don't know it, but when Chick-fil-A was searching for ways to differentiate itself from competitors, rather than scope out other quick service establishments, Chairman (and former CEO) Dan Cathy set up a meeting with none other than Horst Schulze, the legendary co-founder and leader of Ritz Carlton. To Cathy's way of thinking, if you wanted to be world class, you had to benchmark against other world-class organizations, even when they don't serve the same marketplace as you do.

Schulze informed Cathy that if he wanted Chick-fil-A to stand out among his peer restaurants, it should be more like the Ritz. Cathy obliged and added fresh flowers in all its restaurants, put pepper grinders on the tables and hired hosts to make guests feel better taken care of.

Cathy, whose father S. Truett Cathy founded the restaurant

chain in 1946, did just as his mentor, Schulze, suggested, and a great deal more. At Chick-fil-A today there is no delayed maintenance and no potholes in the parking lots. The restaurants have up-to-date equipment and technology business systems that enable people to fly through the drive through at “astounding” rates.

“If you are in that competitive set, that’s just what you do,” noted Cathy in an episode of my Corporate Competitor Podcast. “I think in life, when we pursue our passions, we do the kinds of things that we have to do in order to be world class.”



Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, provides an example of how sometimes the best lessons are learned from those who have more experience and are in direct competition with you. Walton opened his first retail store across the street from a competing store managed by an excellent manager named John Dunham.

Walton had sales experience, but the five-and-dime store was the first operation he’d owned. He delved into studying retail magazines to educate himself on how to make it better, but he also took notes on his competitor’s example, visiting the store to get ideas on displays as well as to check out Dunham’s prices. “I didn’t just learn from reading every retail publication I could get my hands on, I probably learned the most from studying what John Dunham was doing across the street,” he said in his memoirs, *Sam Walton: Made in America*.

Similar self-imposed competition can be seen in the way Avis does business. Since 1962 the company’s mantra has been “We try harder,” and the rental car company tripled its volume in the first year after the slogan was adopted. It wasn’t a gimmick, the company says, but a philosophy each of its employees embraces to this day. The company sets its sights on the leader—whoever it happens to be in the industry each year—and, even if they can’t beat them in market share, Avis aims to work harder for their customers than does their biggest competitor. “The message was about the ex-

tra effort and service...but I think 'We try harder' has always been about service," Maria Miller, Avis's senior vice president of marketing told Newsday in 2000.

By keeping a close eye on market-share rivals, companies can often find ways to strengthen their weaknesses or hone their unique edge.

The GREATNESS Challenge

Runners call them "pacers"—those people who are just a little bit faster and, consequently, make you run a stride or two more quickly in pursuing them. And runners will swear by them. Having someone just ahead whose back is taunting you, or just behind whose footsteps are always drawing closer, can be the biggest motivator in moving a runner forward. As former NFL coach Jan McKeithen famously said, "If you cannot win, make the one ahead of you break the record."

Do you know anyone in your personal or professional life who is a kind of pacer for you? Is there someone who challenges you to reach for the next level either through example, rivalry, or encouragement? It's important to remember that those we associate with can offer us any or all three of these ways of pushing us forward. The question is: will you allow them to do so?

That's the secret: you have to recognize those individuals who have the potential to motivate you, and you have to be willing to let yourself be stretched. It's all up to you as to if and how you let your associations influence you.

It's tough sometimes when our pride wants to tell us that we're already the best, or when we feel we're already working at maximum capacity. Bill Walton was certainly the best, but he still had a chance to be better. Nadia Comăneci was one of the top three or four gymnasts in the world, but she still saw a place she could improve and she used her competition as motivation to do just that.

Who are the power players at your company? What is it about their presentations, reports, or meetings that is so effective? Keep

in mind, though, that the people who are the best often aren't the ones who are out front.

Determine one or two areas in which you feel you would like to see some improvement and then find the one person in your office who emulates those characteristics. If you feel comfortable doing so, ask that person what it is that makes them so good. People are naturally sympathetic to someone who expresses a genuine interest in their lives and abilities, so you're sure to get some good tips.

Don't be content with being good—like Dan Cathy, always be driven to be better. You probably can't be the office champ in every area of your professional life, but figure out what your best asset is and focus on developing that. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself; muscles can grow only if they are worked beyond their current capacity.

Surround yourself with people who will pace you. Look for the ones who set an example, like Wilma Rudolph's sister. Look for the ones whose competition will challenge you to do better as you both work for a common goal, like Mantle and Maris. And look for those who will motivate and encourage you to develop your potential, like the Williams sisters.

We are who we associate with. The five people you spend the most time with in life are going to decide just how successful you are. Are these five people you are closest to taking you to Greatness? The right ones can make all the difference.

On your own team, is there someone who brings out your competitive nature? Too often in the professional world, the notion of "competition" is a rival company or product; but competition can be a positive force, as well.

We all owe it to ourselves to find those people whose presence inspires us to do more with our talents and opportunities. By developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with people who continually push us to grow, we learn not only how to develop ourselves but how to celebrate the accomplishments of others. Much like how the Mannings both challenge and cheer one another, so too do Great individuals.

Who drives you to try harder, study more, prepare better, or reach higher? Whose friendship motivates you to work just a little bit more? If you can point to someone on your team who fills that role, reflect on the recent way his or her presence has helped you raise your own game a notch or two and consider how to use that in the future. If you don't have such a person in your life, find someone whom you can respect and engage with as you work together to improve your performance and stretch your professional muscles.

Invite a friendly rival to lunch or to share a cup of coffee, and talk frankly about what each of you has done to challenge the other. It might surprise you to learn how you have motivated someone else to grow, and your honesty might just lead to even greater growth as you discuss how your relationship can help to move your team ahead.

It is no coincidence that success often runs in families or among tight groups of friends. Greatness surrounds itself with Greatness. It is your responsibility to find—and keep—those people who challenge you to always do better, even as you return the favor to them. Amiable rivalry teaches us to work harder, applaud others, and always keep looking ahead.

We are all blessed to have the opportunity to interact, on occasion, with Great winners. It is our job to rub elbows with those who aspire to Greatness and want to get better; we should approach them and try to understand what makes them successful and what keeps them going. And if you just so happen to be one of those star players in your field, it is your job to accept the invitation to teach us, to help us learn, and to challenge us to improve our lives daily, just as Bill Walton taught Swen Nater. It's not how good you are coming in that matters, it's what you learn from those around you that help you to grow.

Remember the value of association, and make sure that you're making the most of what others around you can offer in terms of motivation and challenge.

Remember to always reach for Greatness.

CHAPTER

3

Believe

The truly Great have faith in a higher power.

Biting at the heels of a picture-perfect season with a 13–0 record in 2005, the NFL’s Indianapolis Colts suffered their first defeat at the hands of the San Diego Chargers. Weeks later and still considered the best team in the league, the Colts suffered another blow as they were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs by the eventual champions, the Pittsburgh Steelers.

That was the Colts’ biggest loss of the season, but wasn’t the biggest loss for the Colts’ head coach, Tony Dungy.

On December 22, 2005, Dungy’s eighteen-year-old son, James, who suffered from depression, took his own life.

The death of James Dungy, who was close to the players and coaches who worked with his father, was a loss felt deeply by all who knew him. But it was, of course, an especially immense loss for Coach Dungy, who called upon his faith for the strength to carry on. Facing his grief, Dungy’s belief was the only thing he had, but it was everything to him.

Like so many Great winners, Tony Dungy's faith was central to his success.

Dungy said it was his faith that allowed him to take something positive out of the tragedy his family faced and to help others in the process. In an emotional eulogy at his son's funeral service, Dungy encouraged other parents to hug their children. He implored parents to let their children know how special they are and to not take for granted their time with them.

A coach who always put faith and family before football, Dungy was known for kicking his assistants out of the office after hours so that they could spend time with their families. For years he had been a father to his own children and a father figure to his players, and he volunteered to provide fatherly advice for everyone from foster children to inmates.

In 2007, after four consecutive playoff appearances and four straight seasons with twelve or more wins, Dungy and the Colts overcame another season of adversity and criticism on their way to a 29–17 victory over the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XLI.

It was a championship the team said they won for their leader, Tony Dungy—the man who kept his faith through tragedy and triumph, and who still held to his beliefs despite all he had been through. “If you don't believe in God you will find yourself spending hours trying to understand things that can't be understood,” Dungy explained. “My faith actually frees me to focus attention on other areas of my life and career.”

Dungy never cared about fame or fortune, but he knew he could use his position and his success to influence people in a positive way. Dungy always put his values before football, and he encouraged his players to do the same. He always led by the example of his character, and he proved that he could motivate his team to be the best without sacrificing his morals or the relationships he had built with his players.

Dungy quietly earned respect through his leadership, his work ethic, the passion through which he coached and—most importantly—his faith. It's what sets him apart from those who are

merely confident or driven or talented. Dungy recognized that after the awards and accolades, the championships and cheering, there was something more, something both higher and deeper—and he built his life around that unshakable belief.

As Dungy showed throughout his career, the truly Great have faith in a higher power. A little faith can go a long way in your life as well—with it you may accomplish things you never before believed you could.

Do not let challenges or failures keep you from accomplishing your ultimate goals. Create a formula for success, adjust it as necessary, but stick with it. Believe that there is a reason for all that happens, and believe that you have a place in that plan.

Living your faith will not only give you strength, but it can lift up others. You may not impact as many lives as Tony Dungy, but having faith can help you make the best of difficult situations and inspire those around you in the process.

More from the Truly Great

Belief has had an essential part in the careers of many Great ones, such as Sandy Koufax. Koufax, a remarkable player by all accounts, spent his entire career with the Los Angeles Dodgers, where he was named the National League's MVP in 1963, and won the Cy Young Award—by unanimous vote—in 1963, 1965, and 1966. Those same three years, he not only won the pitcher's Triple Crown but also led all of baseball in wins, strikeouts, and earned run averages. He pitched the first professional no-hitter thrown by a left-hander since 1880, and he became the youngest player ever voted into the Hall of Fame.

Despite the amazing statistics he recorded during his career, one of the things for which he is most remembered is the day he chose *not* to take the mound. Game One of the 1965 World Series fell on Yom Kippur, the most important of the High Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, and Koufax's Dodgers were scheduled to play the Minnesota Twins.

Koufax was slated to pitch that day but informed his coaches that he would not be able to play. To him, it was far more important to honor his faith than to play a game of baseball and so, instead of taking the field, he fasted and prayed and went to shul. His team suffered a loss with the Dodgers No. 2 pitcher, Don Drysdale, but Koufax knew he had made the right choice.

He went on to pitch Games Two and Five before clinching the title in Game Seven with a performance that many enthusiasts consider one of the best-pitched games ever in a World Series. Not only did he win his second World Series MVP award that year, but he was also named the Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year for 1965.

Koufax was true to his faith beyond all else, and it was this devotion that earned him respect that can't be measured with awards. He became a hero to a generation of children who saw a man quietly but firmly make a difficult choice that honored his heritage and his beliefs—and still managed to lead his team to victory.

In short, Sandy Koufax proved that it really is possible to have it all when he stood up for his faith.



Dave Dravecky, another left-handed pitcher, had a promising career ahead of him. In 1983, just his second season in the majors, he represented the San Diego Padres in the All-Star Game, and the following year he helped the Padres win their first pennant. In 1987 he went to the Giants and pitched a shutout against the St. Louis Cardinals in that season's pennant series. Everything seemed to indicate that the young player had start potential—until a tumor was discovered in his pitching arm.

Dravecky calmly accepted the news and relied on his belief that this was all part of a greater plan. During the 1988 season, Dravecky underwent surgery and rehabilitation for his cancer, and ten months later he returned to the majors to pitch eight innings and lead the Giants to a victory. It seemed too perfect a story to be real.

Then, during his very next game only five days later, bones snapped in his arm, benching him for the rest of the season.

When the Giants won the National League pennant in October 1989, Dravecky was right there with his teammates. His amazing work ethic and inspiring attitude had been a rallying point for the team because despite the terrible luck that seemed to plague him, Dravecky had never lost his positive outlook and drive to win. Tragically, during the postgame celebration, his arm broke a second time, and in the X-rays doctors discovered another tumor. His cancer had returned, and this time it was aggressive.

Two more surgeries followed before the doctors determined that they would have to amputate the arm and shoulder in order to save Dravecky's life. Once again, Dravecky refused to give in to depression or anger.

Instead, he used his experiences to author inspirational books for both adults and children. He and his wife, Jan, also established a ministry for cancer patients, amputees, and their families. Called Outreach of Hope, his message is simple: Don't allow yourself to lose sight of what ultimately matters. Have hope in your faith to carry you through whatever trials you are facing, because belief is the only thing strong enough to get any of us through life.



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar converted to Islam as a student-athlete at UCLA, and he has found his faith to be a source of strength both in his basketball career and in his life after retiring from the pros.

"My decision to convert had to do with me having a moral anchor," he wrote in John Wooden's book, *A Game Plan for Life*. "I realized that was the faith I wanted to embrace."

Formerly known as Lewis Alcindor, Abdul-Jabbar has been a proponent for the Muslim faith. Diagnosed with leukemia in 2008, Abdul-Jabbar told me that he found the peace to accept his trial and the strength to fight it because his deeply held beliefs gave him a sense of perspective.

Now, with a clean bill of health and a renewed sense of purpose, he is working to share the lessons he learned by bringing hope and encouragement to other cancer patients and their families.



Kurt Warner is one of the most successful quarterbacks ever to have played in the NFL, being named the league's MVP in both 1999 and 2001, but his primary goal is to live as a person of faith.

His story is the stuff of fairy tales. Until his senior year at the University of Northern Iowa, he was ranked only third on the depth chart and was not drafted by a professional team out of college. After a tryout for the Green Bay Packers failed (he was competing against no less a formidable talent than Brett Favre, among others) he returned home to Iowa and worked in a grocery store, stocking shelves, before playing Arena Football for three seasons.

But he didn't give up on his goal of playing for the NFL, and his incredible on-field accuracy soon caught the attention of several coaches. More important, however, as Warner will tell you, he placed his primary focus not on his career but on God.

As Kurt and his wife, Brenda, challenged and encouraged one another about their religious beliefs, they began to grow in the understanding and practice of their faith. It was in this process that Warner matured both as a person and as a player, a transformation that finally helped get him noticed by the St. Louis Rams, who signed him in 1998. The following year, he led the team to a victory in Super Bowl XXXIV and was named the MVP of the game.

He went on to set franchise records with several of his subsequent teams, and he ranked among the NFL's top quarterbacks in a number of areas before his retirement in 2010. But for Warner, he was about much more than his statistics.

In each interview, Warner carried his Bible with him and tried to make a mention of his faith. Despite the honors and accolades piled on him, he remained a humble person who acknowledged everything as a blessing that he was proud to receive, not a celebra-

tion of himself. He and his family work with a number of charities to enrich the lives of others by sharing the blessings in their own lives. Warner seeks to be a role model not only for his children but for his fans as well.



Faith is the constant behind some truly Great athletic achievements.

When American wrestler Helen Maroulis won the 2016 Olympic gold medal for women's freestyle wrestling, she became the first American to win gold in the sport. In 2020, she won bronze in women's freestyle wrestling and is the only female American wrestler to win two medals. Growing up, Maroulis struggled with her identity and tried to find her value in winning wrestling matches. She recalls thinking that while God loved her, "wrestling is the only thing that's making me feel worthy right now."

However, setbacks led her to rethink her priorities. Now, she says that "God doesn't need me for wrestling, and I don't need wrestling for this platform. If I want to be a good teammate or if I want to live through faith, for example, I don't need a gold medal to do that."



Professional basketball player Stephen Curry is widely regarded as the greatest shooter in NBA history and the beating heart of the Golden State Warriors, a team he has led to four NBA Championships (2015, 2017, 2018, 2022), while earning nine calls to the All-Star Game. Curry has been outspoken about his faith since the beginning of his professional career and wears a blue wristband during games that professes his Christian faith, and writes scripture references on his shoes.

He recognizes the amazing influence he has through basketball, including starting his Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation that focuses on ending childhood hunger. Curry feels good about the future not because he is a lock for his sport's Hall of Fame but because, as he

wrote in an article for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, “I know I have a place in heaven waiting for me because of Him, and that’s something no earthly prize or trophy could ever top.”

When Julian Edelman retired from professional football in 2021 after 12 years playing for the New England Patriots, he held the distinction of being the first Jewish player named Super Bowl MVP, an honor he won after the Patriots beat the Los Angeles Rams in Super Bowl LIII in February 2019. In the “Vibe of the Tribe” podcast, he said he “really didn’t grow up with a religion.” His mom was Christian and his dad came from a Jewish family, but neither practiced their faith.

But in 2015, Edelman traveled to Israel and publicly embraced his Jewish heritage. He tweeted about Jewish holidays on social media and prayed with a rabbi every Friday during the NFL season. He also wrote a children’s book about a football-loving squirrel named Jules, which was distributed to Jewish families. “I love being a positive influence for the Jewish culture and the Jewish people,” he told the podcast host.



The numbers that detail former Florida State football coach Bobby Bowden’s career are mind-boggling: 389 wins, twelve ACC titles, two national championships, two Heisman Trophy winners, and fifteen straight seasons where his team finished ranked in the Top Five.

But for Bowden, football was just his job—it was never the most important part of his life. He was once asked how he felt about his retirement, and his response was simple: “I’m not paying a lot of attention to it. I have never tried to make football my god. I think coaches that make it their god have a struggle. For me, I’m just starting a new life.”

It was this steadfast faith in something higher that carried Bowden through the peaks and valleys of his career and his personal life. His faith was so important to him that he wanted each

player who came to FSU to have some exposure to what it means. As a result, he spent thirty-four years asking permission from the parents of every new Seminole recruit to include that player in the two Sunday trips the team took each season. One was to a church whose membership was predominantly black, and the other was to a church that was predominantly white.

Bowden told me that in all the years he coached, only two parents asked that their sons not be part of those trips. “I understood why in each case,” he said, “and I think they understood what I try to do with these trips. I just want to make sure our young men know where they can go when things get tough...and they will get tough.”

When he lost a grandson and former son-in-law in an automobile accident during Hurricane Frances in 2004, Bowden insisted it was no time to question God but instead to deepen his trust that there is an ultimate plan to all things.

Bowden told the Associated Press he sought to put his faith first: “I’ve tried. I don’t want people to think that ‘Bobby really thinks he’s a good boy.’ No, I don’t think I’m good. I try to be good. But the thing about it is that God has taught me that if you try to be obedient and try to follow the rules and try to do what He asks you to, you still can be a success.”

He urged his players towards sportsmanship, prayer, and charitable involvement—and he practiced these things himself. In fact, in 2004, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes established the Bobby Bowden Award to honor one college athlete who stands out as a prime example of someone living his or her faith and principles.

When Coach Bowden passed away in 2021, he left behind a remarkable football legacy but an even larger legacy of holding himself and his players to the highest standards of conduct on and off the field—and that’s something much bigger and more lasting than college football.

And for the Truly Great in Business

What place does belief have in the highly competitive and sometimes even cutthroat world of business? As it turns out, belief is

central to the corporate structure of many successful corporations and their leaders.

What would allow a college dropout, who was forcefully removed from the company he co-founded, and who later survived both a rare form of cancer and a subsequent kidney transplant, to become the leader of one of the most innovative and respected consumer electronics companies in the world?

In the case of Apple CEO Steve Jobs, it was his belief, as his spiritual journeys guided him through failure and illness and restored a “beginner’s mind” view of technological development.

What would drive a humble boy born in a small New Mexico mining town to achieve great success in the hotel industry despite the obligations of running his family’s store following his father’s unexpected death, near bankruptcy during the Great Depression, and numerous early career failures?

In the case of Conrad Hilton, it was his faith, as he readily admits that his belief in a higher power was his foremost guide of professional decision making.

Can a bank really include “love” as one of its core values?

Casey Crawford thought so. Crawford is a former professional football player who played tight end for three seasons in the NFL. In the aftermath of winning the Super Bowl with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2003, he walked away from the game in search of a new and more deeply meaningful way to “love on” the world around him.

He found his inspiration in banking, of all places, and the story of how he and co-founder Toby Harris fashioned their purpose-driven juggernaut out of the ashes of the 2008 financial crisis is a testament to the power of loving kindness to move mountains.

In the last decade, Movement Mortgage’s growing team of 4,000 have serviced about one out of every 45 home purchases in the U.S. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. During that same period, Movement used profits to fund the opening of two tuition-free Title 1 schools serving the underserved and marginalized communities in which Movement operates. With plans to open 100 such schools

in the coming years, Casey Crawford and his team are pioneering a new kind of banking business, one whose origins go back to a small classroom at Dematha Catholic High School where Crawford spent two years in high school.

“I went to Dematha to play football, basketball, and baseball,” Crawford told me as a guest on my Corporate Competitor Podcast. “But the lesson that has stayed with me the longest came from a teacher who taught philosophy there. One day, he wrote on the chalkboard *love means acting in the long-term best interests of others*. The phrase and the call have continued to shape my life ever since.”

In addition to serving the greater community, Movement’s “Love Works” programs have helped employees get or stay fit and healthy, reduce credit card debt and save for retirement, form professional mentoring relationships within the bank and outside it and contribute to a wide range of community engagement efforts. “We’ve poured into our team’s lives way beyond a paycheck,” noted Crawford. “We want people to feel they are better men, women, husbands, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends ... because we’re a part of this community, and we’re evolving, making ourselves better.”

In one of the most well-known testaments of personal faith, Chick-fil-A founder S. Truett Cathy adopted a “Closed on Sunday” policy, which has remained steadfastly in place for more than five decades. Despite the estimated \$500,000,000 in lost annual income, the practice has allowed employees to focus on things other than the business, including spiritual pursuits. The rule, which is based on the fourth of the Ten Commandments (“Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy”), allowed Cathy to teach Sunday school classes to 13-year-old boys—a job that he embraced for over fifty years.

Larry Julian writes in his book *God Is My CEO*, “What impresses me most about Truett Cathy is that he has had the courage to follow his beliefs even though he’s pressured by the world to do otherwise. Even though the business world said it didn’t make sense to take Sundays off, Truett insisted on a day of rest.”

Hobby Lobby founder and CEO Steve Green takes a similar view as Cathy. Not only are all Hobby Lobby stores closed on Sundays in order to give their employees an opportunity to spend time with their families and worship together, but Green also puts the Bible first in his company's statement of purpose: "Honoring the Lord in all we do by operating the company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles." Similarly, S. Truett Cathy said his company's corporate mission was to "glorify God."

In another impressive demonstration of faith, Domino's founder and CEO Tom Monaghan sold all of his holdings (including the Detroit Tigers baseball club), often at a sizable loss, to develop as many faith-based students, teachers, and religious leaders as possible. With \$250 million of his own money and partnerships with local organizations, Florida-based Ave Maria University opened in 2008 with an initial enrolling class of almost six hundred students.

The GREATNESS Challenge

Belief can be the thing that gets us through difficult times. It can be the source of strength we didn't know we had. It can be the one fixed point in our life when everything else seems chaotic. It can be the center of our life when we stop to take stock of what we really hold true.

Allow yourself to realize your beliefs and not to feel hindered by them. Evaluate your life honestly and consider how you live your faith in terms of your decision making and your priorities. What do you believe in? How do you take a stand? Where do you turn in times of trial?

The Great ones understand that career accomplishments are not the ultimate measure of a person. Instead, they know that a life lived with belief is a life of purpose and direction.

The truly Great strive to keep their faith at the center of all they do. Faith in God—by whatever name you use—determines how we treat people, how we react to circumstances, and how we view the opportunities that we've been given.

What do you believe? What tenets dictate your decisions, your attitude, and your outlook on life? What standards do you hold for yourself, and how do you live them out? Take ten minutes today to write down answers to these questions. The more clearly you understand your beliefs, the more active a part they can play in your life.

Reconnect with your Higher Power. Carve out the time daily to recenter yourself. Prayer or meditation can help reduce stress, have positive health benefits, improve concentration, and give peace of mind. If you do not already have a regular quiet time, find a way to incorporate your beliefs into your everyday routine. Whether it is a prayer to start your day during your morning commute or a few minutes of meditation before bed, carve out a short block at the same time each day to reflect on your beliefs and recenter yourself.

Some people find times of trouble as a time of spiritual growth; others find difficult periods to be times when their faith slips away from them. Think about the most difficult periods in your life—did you find those were times when you felt closer to your beliefs because they were all you had to trust in, or further from them because you felt alone? If you can identify the pattern by which you seem to react, you may be better prepared for your next spiritual challenge.

Consider several ways that you can make a stand for your faith that will encourage others. Allow your beliefs to be a way of reaching out as well as strengthening your own convictions. Even if it's something as simple as turning off a violent television show or refusing to gossip about a coworker, the example you set as you live your beliefs can be an inspiration to the people around you.

Look at what Mahatma Gandhi accomplished in India simply by refusing to compromise his nonviolent beliefs. By staying true to the values of his Hindu faith, he helped to bring about lasting change and helped to alter the course of history for his nation. Faith has power.

Greatness believes we are accountable to a Higher Power, which the truly Great look to for guidance and from which they find strength. Talents and opportunities are blessings from this Higher Power, and faith is essential in being a well-rounded person. In short, the truly Great believe in something Greater.