

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## **CrossFit, Stoicism and An American Prisoner of War**

Andrew Thompson w/ Anthony Budding

What does CrossFit training have in common with Stoic philosophy and the story of an American Prisoner Of War (POW)? Mental toughness. The ability to tolerate discomfort for a higher purpose. The strength of will to not be broken by adversity. Of course, the demands of a CrossFit workout can't compare in intensity to being tortured as a POW for military secrets, but it does compare in kind. CrossFit is all about scalability. As Coach has always said, the demands of an elite athlete are different from a deconditioned senior only in degree and not in kind.

Vice Admiral (VADM) James B. Stockdale, United States Navy (retired, b.1923-), was the senior-ranking Naval Officer within the Vietnamese prison camp system. He spent nearly eight years as a POW, four of which were in solitary confinement, cloaked in total darkness. His imprisonment was one of the longest such ordeals in American history. How did he survive the torture, the isolation, and the uncertainty of his future?

Before answering the question, is the relevance to CrossFit already obvious? If you read the daily WOD (Workout Of the Day) comments, the sense of torture, isolation and uncertainty are definitely present. Again, the intensity and degree of suffering of a WOD are self-chosen and ultimately fun ("It doesn't have to be fun to be fun"), whereas the intensity and suffering of a POW are frankly unimaginable in comparison. Our hats are off in gratitude for all those who serve our country, especially the POWs.

A very significant factor in VADM Stockwell's survival and mental perseverance was his adherence to Stoic

Philosophy. He was introduced to Epictetus (55-135 A.D.) as a graduate student, prior to being shot down, and kept the philosopher's books on the bedside table. The essence of Epictetus' philosophy is contained in the short phrase, "Do not be concerned with things beyond your power." And when you look at it, most things are beyond your power.

What, then, is within your power? Basically, your will is within in your power to control. "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view that they take of them." Amazingly, VADM Stockdale was able to keep this mindset even as he was landing in hostile territory after ejecting from his plane. And for the next 7 years, he remained unbroken by everything the Vietcong threw at him. The plane, the prison, the torture, and the war were all outside his control, so he did not attempt to change them. He actively managed his mindset to not be disturbed by things. He actively chose a view that provided tremendous inner strength.

Elite fitness requires a similar mental approach. Each workout requires us to manage high levels of discomfort. We don't know in advance what the workout will be. If we train long enough, we have to deal with injury, sickness, external time pressures, and countless other obstacles. How we respond to them dramatically affects our ability to be fit over the long term.

Epictetus wrote, "Sickness is a hindrance to the body... but not to your ability to choose. Say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens, then you will see such obstacles as hindrances to something else." We can see the relevance of this over time, but don't

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## CrossFit, Stoicism, and an American POW (continued...)

we face a decisive moment in every CrossFit workout? We experience it when straining for one more round, lifting 10 more pounds, or attempting a muscle-up. All of these exercises take a committed effort, regardless of the outcome. But do you ever consider quitting after three rounds instead of five? Have you rationalized your way through a workout, finding that you could have performed better upon completion? For most of us, that voice calling for us to quit is always there. CrossFit is all about silencing that voice.

Have you made a conscious effort to strengthen your will, or have you found yourself justifying or making excuses for a poor performance? If you quit when your lungs are ready to explode, what secrets would you tell the enemy that is torturing you? If your squats aren't deep enough, will you correct yourself, or will you make an accommodation and accept special favors from your captor, client, competitor? Certainly, these comparisons may be a bit extreme for most of us, but only through the steeling of our personal resolve, will we be able to prevail in life. We will always have obstacles, enemies, and uncertainties to face. Making difficult choices on a daily basis strengthens our resolve and solidifies our personal will. In turn, this solidified personal will supports our aspirations toward greatness in general and toward elite fitness in specific.

Epictetus understood the premium human beings place on their physical strength. He wrote, "Lameness is an impediment to the body, but not to the will." This perspective provides a guidepost for training when exhausted, injured, or incapacitated to some degree. The last quote was particularly important to VADM Stockdale since he had not been able to stand up by himself as a result of the fifteen torture and interrogation sessions inflicted upon him by his captors. In the crucible of a prison camp, VADM Stockdale's experience provides insight into the capabilities of the human will. His ability to not only survive, but to prevail and return home with his character intact, were significant triumphs of the human spirit. Upon his return, VADM Stockdale continued his military service and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1976.

Any given WOD is easy to describe, but an entirely different matter to execute. How many times have we been blindsided by a workout that looks easy on paper but ends up brutal? Our success depends substantially on our minds, especially in the midst of a multiple round regime, a multi-faceted "fight gone bad", or in an

attempt to meet a "championship" challenge. Burning lungs, gut-wrenching lifts, and wobbly legs often humble us. The champions of CrossFit, and life in general, are those who master their will and confront adversity in whatever form it comes.

The CrossFit WODs, for example, are often outside the realm of our ability to control or influence. It's easy to train hard for short periods of time on our favorite exercises. Perseverance through workouts that include exercises we don't like, and excelling at hated exercises lends itself to greatness. On the difficult days, Epictetus would advise us to accept the difficult realities of the situation and adopt as favorable an attitude as possible. No matter how adverse the situation, Epictetus' Stoic ideas provide an educational framework for prevailing amidst unreasonable odds. VADM Stockdale's extraordinary circumstances show just how far these ideas can take us. Moreover, VADM Stockdale's story serves as a tremendous example of sacrifice, service, and victory against all odds. Can there be a better source of inspiration for us?

VADM Stockdale's story can be studied further in the following books:

*In Love and War* by Jim and Sybil Stockdale (ISBN 0-553-25316-6)

*A Vietnam Experience-Ten Years of Reflection* by James B. Stockdale (ISBN 0-8179-8152-7)

*Honor Bound* by Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley (ISBN 1-55750-694-9)

