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## To Be SEALFIT: A Benchmark Learning Curve

Jared Cohen pushes himself through 50 hours of hell and finds a new self on the other side.

By Jared Cohen

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Brian Doyle

Forty-eight hours later, eight individuals remain where there used to be nine.

A month ago when I was in similar shoes, we started with 17 and ended with 10.

Lance Armstrong said, "Pain is temporary, quitting lasts forever." This sentiment is easy to conceptualize but far from understood when daily comforts one takes for granted—dry clothes, sleep and more—are no longer automatic.

SEALFIT is a training program developed by former Navy SEAL Commander Mark Divine, co-located with his CrossFit affiliate gym, U.S. CrossFit. SEALFIT is a strength-and-conditioning program built upon Greg Glassman's approach to fitness and tailored to the specific demands of special ops. Similar to CrossFit, SEALFIT is the pursuit of a particular lifestyle.

"Being SEALFIT is more than just a sculpted physique; it is a way of life, state of mind and a way of orienting oneself in the world," says SEALFIT.com. While catering to "the unique and specialized needs of SEAL trainees, (SEALFIT) is effective for any professional serious about their fitness and performance, as well as all 'industrial athletes' who must rely on their bodies and minds to be at their peak for their daily jobs."

Mark Divine uses the term "industrial athlete" to include anyone who is focused on continually achieving new levels of excellence in his or her specific field of pursuit. Without a sustainable body for the mind to stand on, the mind is stripped from opportunities in which infinite experiences can stimulate innovative and evolutionary thought.

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**"There is an athlete and warrior in everyone."**

**—Mark Divine**

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During the last weekend of August 2011, I had the opportunity to observe a group of 10 individuals from age 17 to 54 attempt to survive training from early Friday afternoon to late Sunday afternoon. At the end of a three-week stay at SEALFIT in June 2011, I experienced a similar 50-hour journey while enduring no sleep and a chafed, cold and delirious body as well as mind. It is based on these experiences and on the literature of others with similar ideas that I explain the invaluable nature of pairing physical training—as opposed to general "exercise"—with other forms of education, particularly that of traditional academia. The CrossFit/SEALFIT/"warrior spirit" agenda has the ability to unlock untapped potential that can be applied in all domains by beginning with a concern for our bodies today, tomorrow and the indefinite long haul.



Brad McLeod

***During the 50-hour Kokoro Camp, SEALFIT athletes are pushed to the brink both physically and mentally.***

The term "warrior spirit" is widely used to express the motivational "never quit" type of attitude. The essence of a warrior spirit is a shared struggle to continue to move forward when resistance is present. Life has peaks and valleys, successes and failures, or good times and bad times, all of which are primarily unforeseeable. Some individuals are prepared to handle the unknown and unknowable better than others. Divine suggests that these types of individuals have a more developed warrior spirit. Furthermore, Divine has said, "There is an athlete and warrior in everyone. It is a birthright. However, only a warrior has the will to prepare."

SEALFIT's most well known and long standing camp that gives individuals the tools to prepare like a warrior is the 50-hour weekend Kokoro Camp—a crucible experience that tests one's ability to become comfortable amidst the uncomfortable. According to Divine, one pays to have the controlled environment of SEALFIT "force both one's mind and body to come to a cliff and fall off, and one's warrior spirit is that very parachute that gets pulled on the way down."

Kokoro is the Japanese word that is often translated as “mind” and “heart,” indicating the close relationship of the two. Divine’s Kokoro Camp is the moniker denoting the manifestation of an unbeatable warrior spirit. Kokoro is the fifth, final and culminating mountain in SEALFIT’s five mountains of well-rounded success: the mental mountain, the physical mountain, the emotional/spiritual mountain, the awareness/intuitional mountain and Kokoro.

### Chelsea

In CrossFit, Chelsea is a workout in which, every minute on the minute, one has to complete 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 15 squats. Any time left over before the minute mark is for rest, but once the minute is up, it’s back to the grind.

My friends and I were about 16 hours into Kokoro, having spent the last five on the beach, and things were starting to look up, but only because we could feel sunshine peeking through the clouds like a friend whose visit was



Brad McLeod

***After spending three weeks together at SEALFIT, the athletes learn to rely on each other and get through each challenge as a team.***

long overdue. With sunshine came warmth, and I was freezing. I was sandy, I was hungry, and I really just wanted to get as far away from the surf as possible. However, Chelsea awaited my boat crew and me. I was fortunate to have those guys. We had all been through the three-week SEALFIT academy together, so we were comfortable with one another during a time in which we were most certainly uncomfortable with everything else.

The extended blur of the night was pretty much a consistent battle to avoid having to get into the water; however, this avoidance certainly came at its own cost. Here we were at what we believed was the last station of this evolution before we got to go back to headquarters and have a little bit of whatever breakfast they were going to throw our way, and yet we all certainly felt like we had nothing left in us. Enter the initiation of a greater force, the kind that pays no mind to how one feels and acts only on what must be done.

“3, 2, 1 ... Go!” We had to complete five consecutive rounds of Chelsea and do pull-ups off the lifeguard tower about seven feet off the ground. We completed the five rounds. We now had two minutes to run up the hill behind us. If we didn’t make it back in time, we not only had to do another five rounds of Chelsea but we also had to get in the water. We did everything we could to get up that hill; however, our bodies were fighting us, so we had no other choice but to lean on one another.

Upon returning, we were told that we were 10 seconds late. “Hit the surf!” So, we did, and all I kept hearing inside my head was “Fuck this, fuck this!” Back on shore, wet, cold, sandy, exhausted: “Another five rounds of Chelsea. 3, 2, 1 ... Go!”

Surprisingly, we completed the five rounds again; however, it was a close call as to whether we all were going to get through it. At the end of this cycle of Chelsea, they told us to come up with a time for how long it would take us to run up the hill and come back down. We knew that it would be a mistake to suggest too luxurious a time limit. We collectively decided on three minutes. We made it in 2 minutes 57 seconds, so our reward was we did not have to get in the water, and the coaches offered us just one more cycle of five rounds of Chelsea. If we completed it, we were secured from this evolution. If not, we had to hit the surf and be back for more Chelsea.

Four rounds in and we were just barely completing our task under the minute mark, but of course after the fourth round we had two seconds before having to start the fifth. It was do or die. The clock was rolling, and I jumped to grab the lifeguard tower to begin my pull-ups, but I just could not grab it. I fell back, head first on to the sand. I immediately jumped up, attempting the same move, and yet as if I had not even gotten up the first time, I was back on the ground. I went for a third attempt, and the same thing happened. By this point, 30 seconds had passed and I had yet to do my pull-ups, push-ups and squats. My boat crew was doing their best to shout words of encouragement, but I know what they were really thinking: "God damn it, Jared. If we have to hit the surf and do another five rounds of Chelsea ..."

I had no choice but to clear the mechanism around me. Zero in. Thirty seconds to tell my body to stop crying, to tell my mind to shut off, to exist not just for myself but also for my fellow teammates. A "no mind" state of being is what I manifested to get the job done. I jumped for the lifeguard tower, and I gave no thought to whether I would be able to hold myself up. I just went through the movements. I jumped down with 20 seconds remaining for 10 push-ups and 15 squats. I got through the push-ups and had less than 15 seconds for all 15 squats—less than a second per squat. With a millisecond to spare, the task was completed. I think my boat crew was more relieved than I was.

### Creating a Warrior

This is the kind of educational experience that is 100 percent unique. Therefore, it acts as a benchmark that I internalize. All facets of the Chelsea experience are now part of a personal repertoire that can be called upon when facing new endeavors. In this way, as a "civilian warrior," I am now more proficient at handling the unknown and unknowable.

"The true virtue of strategy is in allowing us to overcome all odds in daily life and in helping us attain the closest state we can to being one with the supreme power before going into battle. The development of warrior consciousness is an ongoing thing. Each new experience continually leads to new challenges" (3).

Warriors are seen practicing effortless perfection. They demonstrate virtuosity by doing the common uncommonly well. They are masters of living because of the way in which they emphasize disciplined training of their mental capacities, physical capacities, emotional

capacities, situational awareness and the manifestation of their warrior spirit by integrally living and breathing all these categories of mastery. As Gen. Patton said, they test themselves daily in hopes that the more they would "sweat during peace, the less they would bleed during war." These kinds of individuals build their preparation upon simultaneous education and training.

This is the standard for those who are recognized as SEALs. Kokoro's 50-hour weekend, modeled primarily after the Navy SEALs BUD/s training program, simultaneously involves learning and experiential segments broken up into what are called "evolutions." Some evolutions might last one hour, while others might be as long as eight hours.

Kokoro, in and of itself, is one big evolution. In fact, the overarching characteristic of the Kokoro Camp is its ability to allow individuals to endure suffering in a controlled environment because life, even for the happiest people in the world, is the most painful evolution there is. Kokoro Camp prides itself on giving graduates a frame of reference for how things can always be worse. Life is chaotic and unpredictable. This is undeniable. As Divine says, destiny favors one who is best prepared to overcome any and all preconceived limitations.



Brad McLeod

***Much like life, Kokoro Camp is full of unexpected and sometimes painful experiences.***

## Ruck This

At the end of the second week of the three-week academy, 13 of us were sitting facing a whiteboard, trying not to focus on how sore our bodies were while Coach Divine spoke to us about mental toughness.

"When you hear the term 'mental toughness,' what do you think of?"

Bryan, a 28-year-old computer engineer, says "a ruck." A "ruck" is what the military will refer to as a long hike under a heavy load of gear worn on one's back in a rucksack. In our case, they were really poorly made backpacks. Packs that had zero spine support and shoulder straps that dug into one's body. As soon as Bryan said "a ruck," we all laughed, including Divine, because we all knew this could not have been truer.

During the academy, we did two rucks. One eight-mile ruck along the sand, and one 11-mile ruck up and down part of Palomar Mountain, which has a peak of 6,500 ft. Rucks were certainly my biggest weakness other than enduring being cold and wet. I would confidently say I was one of the better-conditioned athletes, but when it came to moving a heavy load for any longer than 2 hours, especially uphill, I was easily one of the worst.

So, after 31 hours of Kokoro Camp, meaning roughly two days with no sleep, the 10 of us who remained loaded into two vans while a few of the coaches drove us about an hour from headquarters to the base of Palomar Mountain for an 11-mile hike up and an 11-mile hike down. Our packs roughly had 40 lb. of sand, water, meals ready to eat (MREs) and other snacks, and we held one weighted PVC pipe to simulate a weapon. Prior to this, our evolution had involved moving 90 percent of the SEALFIT/CrossFit gym so we could then clean the gym. Then we had to bring all equipment back into the gym 400 meters downhill. This took us three and a half hours, so we were definitely ready for the 22-mile hike ahead of us.

Initially, I was just happy to be done with being cold, wet and sandy, and I was trying not to focus on how rucks were something I dreaded. We got off the vans at the base of the mountain. It was pitch black. We were given a handful of glow sticks, split into two groups of five, and told to watch out for rattlesnakes on the side of the road when venturing to take a piss. The coaches gave one walkie-talkie to each group leader for us to check in every hour until we got to the top so they knew our whereabouts and could be present at checkpoints for us to refill our water bottles.



Brad McLeod

**Not a typical day at the beach for these Kokoro Camp participants.**

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Finally, we were off. Not even three minutes in, my back felt like it was being snapped in half, and I quickly went to that dark place of "you got to be fucking kidding me." Then, a minute later, the pain in my back subsided, and all of the sudden I had an entirely new challenge: staying awake! Before I knew it, my eyes were closed and I was walking off the road, approaching rattlesnake territory and about to fall flat on my face only to be saved by that quick jolt of consciousness. Soon the four other members of my group were about 150 meters ahead of me, and they slowly realized I was hurting—and we had only been walking for about 10 minutes.

Three of them stopped, and Mark Carrion, our group leader, a veteran of both the Kokoro Camp and the three-week academy, a Naval Academy student, and a SEALFIT coach/ Navy SEAL officer to be, came stumbling down to retrieve me and attempted some words of encouragement, even though, for the first time, I could see he was hurting as well. He took his place behind me to make sure I did not get left behind again. Of course, it did not take long for me to fall behind. Like a workout of its own, every minute on the minute I struggled to force my eyes to stay open and make sure I did not fall flat on my face. It was 10 minutes later, and I was somehow more than 150 meters behind the group again, so Mark issued a break. I could not have been more thankful. We dropped our packs and all fell to the ground as one.

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After about five minutes of breaking, we decided to get back to it and attempt to only break every 20 minutes. My guys struggled, trying to get me to stick to such a plan. I did not know what to do. I could not for the life of me stay awake, and I knew I was holding my guys back. They were trying their best to keep me going, but they were in similar situations. One only has so much energy, and I can tell you I had not even enough to keep myself going. Eventually, Mark took hold of my pack, and I carried only his PVC pipe in addition to mine. I had so many mixed feelings taking place: exhaustion, gratitude and remorse for literally not being able to carry my own weight.

I was trying everything to stay awake: slapping my face, chomping on some candy bars I had packed in order to manifest a sugar high, but nothing was catching fire. Ultimately, Mark, pushing me in front of him, said, "Jared, now or never. You, we've all come too far to pull the plug now. Dig deep. Strong, stoic motherfucker. Strong, stoic motherfucker. Say it and don't stop."

Unfortunately, unlike in the movies, there was not an instantaneous jolt of fresh adrenaline; nonetheless, the speech was needed, and while, for the first time during

both the academy and Kokoro, I actually considered quitting, I quickly told that thought to bother someone else because I was the strong, stoic motherfucker who wasn't going to surrender before reaching the finish line.

We pressed on, a little behind schedule but still ahead of the other group. Like clockwork, every 20 minutes we would drop our packs, fall to the side of the road and pass out. Each one of us took turns staying awake to make sure the rest of us were not out for more than five minutes. A couple of miles from the top, I even refused a couple of the nap breaks and continued walking because I feared that if I drifted an inch from the momentum I would be back to sleepwalking.

At the top, both my feet felt like giant, inflamed blisters, and, due to lack of sleep, I felt like everything was spinning. After Mark took care of the reconnaissance details of a nearby house, we refilled our waters and waited for the van to make its way all the way down the mountain.

There was only one checkpoint left: the base of the mountain. We strategically decided to take a 45-minute nap before enduring the final 11 miles downhill. I remember all of us huddling on the ground next to this big log. I awoke to Mark gathering everyone up to make our trek down. At this point, I demanded my pack back and felt relatively pumped to get off the mountain. However, that enthusiasm was short lived. Going downhill was a lot more painful on the existing blisters and rapidly gave birth to new blisters. It was about 3 a.m., and it was freezing, but it was not long before I was back to sleepwalking.



Brad McLeod

**Cohen repeated the mantra "strong, stoic motherfucker" to get through the weekend.**

"You all right, Jared?" my buddy, Eric, asked me.

"Just fucking talk to me, Eric. Don't stop talking. I need to stay awake!"

At about 4 a.m., we dropped for one of our five-minute snoozes. I remember waking to Mark yelling, "Where am I? What the fuck is going on? How did we get here? What are we doing on the ground?" Now it was our turn to comfort Mark after we all had a good laugh about how our fearless leader had also hit his breaking point. Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said it best, "Fatigue makes cowards of all of us."

It was then around 5:30 a.m., and our friend the sun was back to say what we all needed to hear: "You guys made it another day." One step at a time. One breath at a time. We owed everything to micro goal setting, the sun's warmth and its ability to fight off fatigue, and each other.

Before SEALFIT, I was no stranger to teamwork, team-building exercises, team-building experiences, the value of brotherhood, etc. But none of that compared to what I experienced during those 10 hours and 22 miles. I heard numerous times during the academy: "Rambos do not exist! Your teammates are everything." And they most certainly were. We had about two miles to go, and we were generally in much better spirits.

"Thank you guys so much. I thought that was it for me, and I hated myself for holding you guys back, but you guys were never going to leave me behind."



Brad McLeod

***The SEALFIT experience is an evolution—participants are forever changed.***

"No worries, Jared. That is what this all about. We all reach our breaking point at some time, and it is the job of the rest of team to be there to pick up the extra load when that happens."

"That's right, Mr. CrossFit, we weren't going to leave you stranded up on Palomar!"

Finally, we loaded into the van, ready to catch a few Z's before the next evolution, until we heard, "Any eyes that I see closed will result in 50 burpees." This was our 50-hour hell week after all. Sleep was technically not an option, at least not until we were graduates at around 3 p.m. later that day.

We accumulated about 500 burpees by the time we were back at headquarters.

### **A New State of Mind**

So much of Kokoro and the academy blends as one; however, the infamous 22-mile ruck is something I am sure I will never forget. That 6,500-foot mountain tested all five mountains of the SEALFIT agenda, and because of that, no matter what happens from now on, I have this crucible experience as a tool, a reference point and an eternal roadmap for future endeavors. Because of that, I am empowered and forever grateful.

There's an interesting thing about states of consciousness: they come and they go. Even great peak experiences or altered states, no matter how profound, will come, stay a bit, then pass. No matter how wonderful their capacities, they are temporary. Where states of consciousness are temporary, stages of consciousness are permanent. Stages represent the actual milestones of growth and development. Once you are at a stage, it is an enduring acquisition (6).

In the academy, we extensively studied Ken Wilber, a current American philosopher, due to the compatibility of his Integral Theory model with SEALFIT's five-mountain model. The physical endeavors of SEALFIT produce outcomes that are applicable to all. Evolution is not a temporary state. It is an occurrence that is completely enduring. Once a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, there is no turning back. Similarly, we are the result of atoms that became molecules that became cells, which created the organism that is the human species (6). The academy, Chelsea, the ruck, Kokoro and interning Kokoro are all examples of stages of consciousness. What were temporarily "passing states have become permanent traits" (6).

The educational climax of Kokoro involves a breakthrough that comes long after the body's normal understanding of fatigue and the mind's normal understanding of frustration and irritability. This is right at that point in which one has begun to exist in more of an autopilot fashion. Psychologically, one has no choice but to quiet the extremes of anxious, obsessive, stressed emotions. Or, more poetically, during the ruck, I had no choice but with the help of my teammates to plug into my "witness" as the commander-in-chief and allow my ego to act no longer as the leader but as a follower.

Yogi Amrit Desai is a teacher of "manifest vs. unmanifest reality," and in these teachings is the unfolding of spiritually being aware of one's ego mind vs. one's witness. Divine refers to the ego mind as the "monkey mind." The monkey mind is that voice that is always "chomping at the bit," "conditioned by social norms and personal likes and dislikes" (2). On the other hand, the witness views every event as neutral, neither inherently positive nor negative; rather, they are what one wishes to make of them in a non-impulsive manner. To bypass the monkey mind and be in touch with one's own witness is to see neutrality.

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"Presence is undivided; choosing for or against is what gives birth to the ego-mind" (2). Yet the ego is still part of one's individual makeup—and an important component. It is critical to not let the ego mind take complete control. The former SEALs and coaches at Kokoro Camp use harshness as a means to break down one's ego and let the witness take primary control.

To perform the right technique in gung fu, physical loosening must be continued in a mental and spiritual loosening so as to make the mind not only agile but free. . . . There is nothing to try to do, for whatever comes up moment by moment is accepted, including non-acceptance. No-mindedness is then not being without emotion or feeling, but being one in whom feeling is not sticky or blocked (4).

Often one does not know how to fight, and flight is not an option, so, instead, one freezes. Therefore, by being able to illuminate one's own witness, one begins to start mastering an expertise of unconscious competence: the kind of proficiency that resists paralysis.

I am always hearing people comment on ways in which to simulate a completely present moment because they are tremendously therapeutic. However, they rarely come in an active manner that sacrifices temporary pleasure for long-term reward. Kokoro Camp forces blood, sweat and tears out of one to achieve something that can never be taken away. It is the result of putting everything on the line for 50 hours that creates the opportunity to shed the large amount of baggage and finally know the difference between what is worth grappling with and what is worth simply letting go.

During the last two hours that I interned at Kokoro, I feared what the everlasting effects of this experience would be for the trainees. I went through it and am empowered by the experience, which is why I returned to help. However, I could not but worry about the brutality of verbal abuse the coaches were dishing out in addition to the continual beatings on the trainees' bodies. The trainees were told they were worthless. They were practically told to quit and were tempted to turn on one another.

Nonetheless, around 1:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon, the trainees were "secured." As soon as Divine spoke these words, I saw emotions of triumph and brotherhood that instantly replenished my faith and belief in SEALFIT's objective. These eight individuals were changed forever, and they were fully conscious of this.

"The more you sweat during peace, the less you bleed during war," and regardless of how much the 50 hours of Kokoro do in fact feel like war, they exist in a controlled environment of peace.

### **The Warrior Spirit**

Benchmark education is invaluable by way of its balance in its teachings of the five mountains of success, as well as the way in which it exists as a hands-on learning experience: teaching and coaching that happen as one.

In education, thinking and thought are a means to an end. They are the means to understanding, and understanding is the "a-ha moment," the very epiphany that lights a fire in one's belly and reminds us of the unparalleled uniqueness of the human experience.



Similarly, SEALFIT taps into the mental, emotional, intuitional and warrior spirit through the platform of physical training that journeys far beyond the threshold of fatigue. This cannot be done if one's physical components exist in a vacuum. Proper physical stimulation is as much neurologically bound as it is organically bound, meaning there is a neuroendocrine response, an integration of the nervous system and the endocrine system. Neurotransmitters and hormones are working together. Therefore, let physical training—the kind devoted to body mastery, and the kind that is completely transferable and required for life's broad range of time domains and modalities—be a necessary example of what it means to both survive and thrive.

"Fall down seven times, stand up eight." Survival of the fittest, is it not?

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**SEALFIT taps into the mental, emotional, intuitional and warrior spirit through the platform of physical training.**

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Fortunately for humankind, we are not a bunch of brains in vats. Unfortunately, it means maintenance. If done properly, the inclusion of a physical emphasis will, in most learning environments, transcend outside the content-specific nature of any one domain. The overwhelmingly shared context among humankind is about quality of performance. Whether in the field, in the classroom, in the office or on stage, it does not matter. What matters is having the consistent ability to perform. Chronic cases of inflammation, fatigue, tension, stress and being overweight are going to be factors that compromise one's achieving the peak of performance.

Chronic stress is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Robert Sapolsky's *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* analyzes the phenomenon of stress, stress-related diseases and stress-coping mechanisms by making the claim that the physiological stress response is a survival mechanism of the body's to restore allostasis, which is the process through which organisms actively adjust to demands that originally caused some amount of instability.



Brad McLeod

***An old Japanese proverb says, "Fall down seven times, stand up eight."***

"The secretion of certain hormones, the inhibition of others, the activation of particular parts of the nervous system, and so on. And regardless of the stressor—injured, starving, too hot, too cold, or psychologically stressed—you turn on the same stress response" (5).

Therefore, when having to activate the stress response on a consistently frequent basis, the body is in a constant state of emergency, causing growth and tissue repair to be curtailed (5). As humans, we have evolved, and a big part of our lives are mundane tasks that easily cause chronic stress and eventually exhaustion and psychological paralysis.

I refuse that this be the death of us. I refuse mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, neurosis and paranoia to be a lost battle that one accepts and treats accordingly. Why not let physical training be the path to an indefinitely growing buffer?

Greg Glassman, when answering the question "what is fitness?" uses a sickness-wellness-fitness continuum.

"Fitness and health are different measures of the same reality" (1).

Therefore, regardless of the presence of some catastrophe, the fitter one is, the greater the buffer that exists in protecting one from being in the realm of sickness. In contrast, if one is 40 percent body fat, one is considered pathological. This person is literally on his or her deathbed. No resistance exists, and one can be certain that inevitable daily chronic stress is going feed on this low level of resistance until there is nothing left of this person.

Let us assume that the key to life is choice and optimization, and one can only optimize choice with options. Physical training begins with ensuring one has options and ends with ensuring one has the clarity of mind to make the most of those options.

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### About the Author

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