It’s your big moment. You have an important presentation to make. You’re getting ready for a big date. Or you have a critical parenting decision to make. You need to be at your best, and you’re hoping your best abilities—and judgment—will be there.

There’s nothing wrong with hoping to do well. But hoping is not a strategy. The most successful elite athletes have figured out that wishing and hoping aren’t going to separate them from the rest of the pack.

They follow a distinct philosophy and set of learnable mental skills that let them prepare more effectively and perform with more focus and freedom.

In *Life as Sport* you will learn that philosophy and the tools to implement it. You’ll learn how to *expect* success in your life, not just hope for it.

Over the course of a decade, as a sport psychologist for professional teams and world-class athletes, I’ve been involved in plenty of casual conversations with friends and acquaintances who have a very natural curiosity about the work
I do—both from my perspective as a doctor and the athlete’s perspective as a competitor.

They want to know how athletes think and how we work together to improve the way they think. Many times what people are really asking me is, “How different are elite athletes from the rest of us?” And, indirectly, “Is there some kind of trick or shortcut I can take out of their experience to help me perform better in my life?”

I can certainly understand the fascination people have with elite performers. I can’t imagine a more interesting profession than working with and getting to know world-class athletes and top-level financial and entrepreneurial executives on a day-to-day basis as a performance coach.

I’m truly fortunate to have the job I have.

Still, many of those casual conversations got to be pretty uncomfortable for me. I felt my own internal pressure to come up with a way to simply and quickly explain the world of performance psychology and share some interesting stories from my career—but without violating the sacred confidentiality promise that governs these professional relationships.

Over time I got better and better at explaining this world of mental coaching—and more importantly I was able to clarify both the specifics of what I do for elite performers and why that work is so enjoyable for me.

The theories and techniques in this book are the result.

Life as Sport is the product of thousands of hours of conversations with athletes from various teams and sports: power forwards, tennis phenoms, power-hitting outfielders, raw minor league prospects, battle-scarred linebackers, journeyman utility players, fading superstar pitchers, hedge fund managers, precocious entrepreneurs, A-list actors, and dozens of other elite achievers in sports business and performing arts.
Each chapter is a compendium of stories, theories, and techniques that have been helpful to players, coaches, and executives in professional sports. I know they work, not only because I’ve personally witnessed others improve by using them or because they are largely backed by science but because these techniques and this way of being have also been helpful to me.

One important concept that emerged during these casual “cocktail party” conversations was that more than just a set of sport psychology techniques, there was a certain life philosophy that successful athletes lived by: an internal code that allowed individuals with immense talent to reach the highest plateaus of human performance.

Of course, having world-class talent is an important part of achieving those levels of athletic attainment. But many of the identifiable mental characteristics that separate the best from the rest are mental skills, not something innate, like height or the ability to turn on a 98-mile-per-hour fastball.

In other words, they’re strategies that can be studied, learned, practiced, and improved.

In this book we’re going to talk about those skills and what virtually any person can do to improve them—not just to increase performance but also to enjoy the ride.

What do these elite achievers do?

I describe it as a balanced combination of playfulness, reality-based optimism, and a well-honed ability to focus on the present moment.

Take this example of one of my baseball clients, a pitcher I worked with all through his minor league career. When he got the call to the big leagues for his first start, I watched very carefully—hoping he would be able to display the skills I knew he had. As much as I want a positive result for all the clients I work with in sports and other areas, when I watch a performance, I
am mostly looking for how my clients perform in terms of their mental game. Do they appear to be focused, centered on each moment? How relaxed are they? What does their breathing look like? Are they able to reset and adjust to a negative outcome? Do they seem confident and aggressive? And perhaps most importantly, do they seem to be enjoying themselves behind their game face?

From the first inning, he looked like he belonged on a major league roster. As he threw each pitch, he seemed to be fully confident about where it was going to end up. When one of the infielders made an error behind him—something that can derail the composure of even the most elite pitchers from time to time—he shrugged it off as something outside of his control and moved on.

Over the course of a few innings he got some tough calls from the home plate umpire, common in the sometimes near hazing of rookie pitchers in the big leagues, and he started to hear it from opposing fans behind home plate. But he seemed impervious to those distractions, and he moved through the opposing lineup once and then again. He kept his head high and his chest out, showing confidence the way we had discussed, and he kept pounding the strike zone.

It looked like it was just him and the catcher out there. It was a very sophisticated game of catch in which the hitter and, thus all pressure and self-evaluation, simply disappeared.

Later I heard some of the coaches and other players talking about him, about how he had such a mound presence out there. He had the composure of a veteran—one of the highest compliments you can pay a newly minted ballplayer.

When you watch a performance as a fan, it’s natural to assume that many of the characteristics that make up the player doing his achievements are innate. The guy out there is a
natural—a physical and mental marvel—doing things most people couldn’t dream of replicating. But that perspective shortchanges just how much work goes into achieving at that level. Sure, many professional athletes were born with physical advantages. But to get to the top and stay there, athletes have to go through a tremendous amount of mental training and practice.

I had known this pitcher throughout his time in the minors. He first contacted me as a raw ball of talent, freaked out about the prospect of going to play professionally, thousands of miles from home. Over the years we worked on his mental state as a thing he could practice—just like he would with the slider he was learning. We developed a plan to improve his breathing and gave him a strategy to avoid rushing his delivery—a natural response to the uncomfortable pressure that comes when you think the whole world is watching and waiting for you to pitch.

With some breathing drills—which we’re going to talk about in Chapter 4—he was able to relax on the mound and let his talent take over. He was able to quiet his mind and control the relaxation process, leveraging everything in his control to increase his chances of staying positive.

Positivity is a fascinating thing in that most people know at a basic level that being positive is more productive than being negative. But when things start to go wrong, it’s easy to lose the commitment to that positive outlook and fall into a spiral where you become focused on things you can’t control.

When this happens someplace like on a major league pitcher’s mound, it’s easy to see the result.

When a pitcher gives up a couple of hits in a row, what he does next sends some powerful signals to both himself and the opposing team. Many times a pitcher in that situation will curse himself and kick the dirt in obvious frustration.
This is an understandable reaction, but it hurts the pitcher on two fronts. First, it adds emotion and stress to the situation, basically guaranteeing that the next few pitches won’t be the pitcher’s best. Also, it offers powerful positive reinforcement to the opposing batter. He sees the pitcher on the ropes and gains his own confidence.

Over the years we developed a strict system as to what he would do if there was the slightest unwanted outcome or hiccup to his performance. He would get off the mound and enact a few ritualized behaviors to “flush” this outcome and move on. By smoothing some dirt with his foot, raising his head to eye level and pushing out his chest, he was telling his body and the world, “I’m ready to compete.”

The philosophy elite performers adopt to achieve this state—and the skills they use—aren’t secret, but it’s certainly information that is closely protected. An athlete’s physical makeup—the attributes of his or her body and the raw power or raw skill used within each sport—is easy to measure and pretty straightforward to train and repair. But mental makeup and “toughness” is harder to quantify, and historically it hasn’t been as well understood.

Many competitors over the years have operated in fear that whatever hold they may have on those nonspecific concepts like “confidence” or “the zone” would appear or disappear arbitrarily or at a whim.

But over the last ten or fifteen years athletes have developed more of both acceptance and understanding of mental performance training, and they’ve been able to work with professionals like myself to hone those skills to the ultimate in competitive sharpness. In this book, you’ll get an inside look at the emerging field of “Mental Conditioning.”

As you’ll see in Life as Sport, those skills aren’t only useful for raising a hitter’s batting average or aiding a pitcher in throwing
more strikes; this book will show you how you can use the techniques of sport psychology and the attitudes of the world’s top performers to improve your most important performances in life—to really treat your job, relationships, business, and other important activities as sports. In other words, you improve your daily experience by treating life as a game that, with careful thought and science-based technique, can be understood more completely, practiced, and more fully enjoyed.

Every life has its unique challenges. Now each of those challenges will be an occasion to enter the arena—an opportunity to channel your skills, refocus your energy away from the past, and connect in an immediate way with the moment at hand. You’ll begin to focus on enjoying the actual process of learning and improvement—not just some arbitrary definition of “achievement” at the end of the process.

And to me that enjoyment is really one of life’s most important pieces. When you learn to enjoy the journey—the process of learning and improving—you’re providing the fuel for that “mental toughness” you hear athletes talk about all the time. Determination and grit and the ability to “grind it out” are great, but you can’t sustain any of that without a source of enjoyment. When you embrace and enjoy the process, you’re going to be more satisfied, which makes you more likely to keep up the fight—to “grind it out” when necessary.

| CONCLUDE THIS | Introduction on a personal biographical note, as writing this book has been a part of both a professional and personal journey for me.

My first professional experience in the world of sport psychology came in 2007 when I began to contribute to Major League Baseball’s rookie career development program, an
off-season conference for the game’s most promising minor league prospects, where they learn how to clear the mental, emotional, and financial hurdles that come when you get to the big leagues. I worked with many star baseball players from a variety of teams in those first couple of years. In addition, this work led me to work with athletes in other sports. Many of the examples in this book are based in part on those early experiences, getting to know the best of the best as they made their way onto the world’s stage. I have continued to participate in the MLB rookie program over the past decade and have had many learning experiences while my colleagues and I have worked to help the best and brightest make their entrance into the “Show.” In 2008 I started working with the New York Mets as a psychologist for their minor league system under my mentor, Dr. Jeff Foote, who was the sport psychologist for the big league team. In 2014 I moved up to become the Mets’ team psychologist, and I now spend a majority of my time working with either the Mets players or elite athletes and performers in other sports and business.

It didn’t take long into my work with baseball players to notice that I was referencing techniques and using sports-related anecdotes to teach many lessons outside the world of sports, both to clients in other fields like finance and for mental improvement in other aspects of life like relationships and parenting. Nonsports clients also started asking me for more stories and help in applying the same sport psychology techniques I use with elite athletes to effect change in their lives. I began to adapt all the ideas we’ve been talking about into understandable and easy-to-learn concepts and techniques for people to apply to many, if not all, life situations—and created the foundation for this book.
Before long I began to think of this philosophy as one in which life’s moments were a string of performances—whether you’re an athlete or not. Talk to Adrian Grenier about his life as an actor, director, and musician, and you’ll hear the *Entourage* star offer a very similar assessment. “We’re all performing in our lives,” he told me. “You’re creating a role or a character, just like an actor would, and you go through the process of discovery to find out what works and what doesn’t. You try things and experiment to find out who your character is and who you want him or her to be, and those experiments inform the final product. When it comes to real life, people think they are what they are and they can’t change it, but you’re very much making decisions.”

Sometimes these performance decisions and moments have an audience of forty thousand, as in the case of a professional athlete—or millions, as in Adrian’s case with his television shows and movies—but for you and me they might often be witnessed by only one or maybe two people. In that view there was a certain philosophy applicable to sport that could be transferred to all of your life’s moments for both greater success and enhanced enjoyment.

I began to use the *Life as Sport* philosophy and techniques in my own life. As the years passed, I found myself thinking of the *Life as Sport* pillars of enjoyment, present and future orientation, objective optimism, and process focus when I started to feel stress about a particular presentation or relationship challenge.

In this process, a few years back I had a personal awakening that fundamentally changed the way I look at my life.

At age thirty-five I was married, had two children and a successful practice, was a professor in a medical school, and was working as a sport and performance psychologist with some of
the most successful athletes and performers of our time. But sometimes I would get bent out of shape whenever the people in my life weren’t succeeding in some objective way. Whether they were family members, star athletes, other clients, or employees, I would take on a lot of stress if they were struggling.

I remember talking to one very well-known basketball player whom I had helped in the past and who had been struggling quite a bit. I was discussing the *Life as Sport* philosophy with him when suddenly I realized I wasn’t applying it to myself! Despite all of my desire to help him, I couldn’t control what the result of our work would be. When I was able to direct my attention to a present focus, practice techniques to move myself beyond what went wrong in the past, enjoy the process by reminding myself about what I enjoyed about working with him, and be positive and optimistic—within reason—I began to feel I was playing in the zone. I felt like an elite athlete playing his or her sport. It was an epiphany for me: *the more that I can treat life in general as a sport, the more effective I will be at it.* If I can treat every presentation, every tough relationship moment, every new endeavor as a sporting event in which I try to focus on what I can control and stick to the *Life as Sport* principles, I will, as a result, succeed more and enjoy the process to a much greater extent.

Above and beyond all the theories and techniques presented, this book will help you treat your work, your relationships, your life just as an elite athlete would treat his sport . . . and by doing so, it will help you win.

**Enjoyment Exercise**

At the end of every chapter in this book you’ll find these “Enjoyment Exercises”—small rituals you can practice not just to
get better at the techniques shared in each chapter but also to improve at the critical skill of mindfulness or deepening your connection to the moment. As you’ll read, I believe it is extremely important for all of us to seek improvement as well as to enjoy and truly *experience* the journey of improvement. That means taking in and enjoying moments as they pass. These exercises will help you do just that. Here’s one to start you off: play the “game within a game.” As you’re reading this book, try to enjoy competing with yourself about how present you can be while taking in the information. Make it your practice to challenge yourself after each section to see how much information you feel you’ve retained. You can do this by sharing an idea that you enjoyed from each chapter with a friend. Try to be as specific as possible when you describe your enjoyment to him or her. What was the concept that impacted you, and why?