

THE BIG IDEAS

On Fear

Wisdom from Jerry and friends.

“Never Quit!”

The voices in Jerry’s head.

Growth + Grit

And all-out effort.

How You Practice

= How you play.

Record-Setting Process

Break record. Back to work.

The Best You

Is what we’re after.



Go Long!

My Journey Beyond the Game and the Fame

BY JERRY RICE WITH BRIAN CURTIS · BALLANTINE BOOKS © 2007 · 178 PAGES

“This is the story of how I got to where I am today and some of the great lessons I’ve learned along the way. For you football fans, there is plenty of pigskin in the pages that follow—never-before-written details of why I chose a small college; what my time with the San Francisco 49ers was like; my relationships; the Super Bowls; what I think about Joe Montana and Steve Young; my opinions about Deion Sanders and Terrell Owens; why I moved on to the Oakland Raiders, and so much more. But there are also behind-the-scenes stories of *Dancing with the Stars*—what really went on before the cameras rolled, and why I made the decision to participate. Life is made up of memorable moments—some good, some bad—and I’m not shy about sharing those memories with you: The calloused hands from helping my father lay brick in the hundred-degree heat of Mississippi; the subtle racism all around me growing up; listening as my name got called on NFL Draft Day; watching the birth of my three children and the near-death complications experienced by my beloved wife, Jackie; the too-soon death of my father, and the triumph of *Dancing with the Stars*.

Go Long! is about going that extra mile, taking a step away from the safe shores to experience all that life has to offer. It took me many years to learn how to suck the marrow out of life and recognize what was driving me on the inside. Maximizing that drive is the key to success for me, and could be for you as well.

I hope that you enjoy reading about my journey as much as I did living it, but more importantly, I hope you are enjoying your own journey.”

~ Jerry Rice from *Go Long!*

“As for me, if I was going to play, it wasn’t good enough just to be average. I had to be great. The only way I knew how to do anything was to outwork, outperform, and outplay everyone else.”

~ Jerry Rice

I picked this book up after sharing some wisdom from Jerry Rice in our Note on [Chasing Excellence](#). → “Today I will do what others won’t so tomorrow I can do what others can’t.”

I always knew Jerry had an extraordinary work ethic and I thought it would be fun to hear about his journey in his own words. And, here we are. :)

For those who may not know, Jerry is the greatest NFL wide receiver of all time. You might also know him from his *Dancing with the Stars* awesomeness.

And, perhaps most importantly, he seems like a really good guy—committed to being a role model and expressing the best version of himself in everything he does.

This is a fun, behind-the-scenes look at what makes him tick—starting with his upbringing in a tiny Mississippi town all the way through, as per the sub-title, “Beyond the Game and the Fame.”

If you love sports autobiographies and like hearing about how tenaciously (!) hard the great ones worked to attain their greatness, I think you’ll dig the book. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas and I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

JERRY ON FEAR

"I was afraid to fail. But you know what? Fear of failure isn't always a bad thing. It helped keep me focused on the task. And a fear of failure has carried me through my life."

~ Jerry Rice

"It's probably a big surprise to many of you that I am so insecure about my success. In fact, it took me years to admit that fear is at the root of my performance. It goes against what the literature and 'gurus' out there insist, that you have to let go of your fear to ever be successful; that you can't be afraid to fail. I don't think that's an absolute. My fear of failing as a child carried over on the football field in high school and then in college. I was so concerned about not being successful that it pushed me to be successful. All of those extra hours in the gym or on the track or on the practice fields were more than just about hard work; they were about avoiding failure. Before every game in my NFL career I was scared—scared to drop the big pass, scared to let my teammates down. And now I realize it all goes back to not wanting to disappoint my father."

That's from the first chapter called "Way Down South" in which we learn about Jerry's super-humble beginnings in a super-small town in Mississippi.

Short story: Jerry was the 6th of 8 kids. His dad was a bricklayer. He and his brothers would work with their dad in the 100-degree heat—creating a little line to throw the bricks to their dad who laid them down one by one. Jerry was the last connection before his dad. He didn't want to drop the brick. That fear of letting his dad down (in that context and beyond) was a catalyst throughout his life.

He makes the VERY important point that: *"I was afraid to fail. But you know what? Fear of failure isn't always a bad thing. It helped keep me focused on the task. And a fear of failure has carried me through my life."*

In fact, the power of his self-doubt is a recurrent theme throughout the book. In a chapter called "The Rookie" he walks us through how he started dropping balls he used to catch—with his home crowd booing him and local sports fans and pundits saying they made a huge mistake trading a bunch of picks to get him.

He tells us: *"I had my doubts during that tough stretch, wondering if I really was good enough to play in the NFL. But believe it or not, doubts have helped me in my journey, doubts from those around me or doubts within me. We all have doubts about our abilities and chances for success but it's how we react to those doubts that matters. Yes, it would be nice if we have complete confidence in every decision or challenge we take on, but that's not reality. Even the most accomplished people in society have doubts. But they never let the doubts prevent them from succeeding; rather, they embrace them and use them as motivation."*

All of that talk about fear reminds me of a basketball legend, a great mixed martial artist, an old-school philosopher and my favorite Zen therapist.

First, the NBA legend. Jon Eliot tells us this great story in [Overachievement](#): *"Bill Russell is one of the great names in basketball, an all-American... the only athlete to ever win an NCAA Championship, an Olympic Gold Medal, and a professional championship all in the same year—1956... But Bill Russell had this one problem: He threw up before every game."*

Hah. And, d'oh.

Now, the MMA fighter. In his autobiography [The Way of the Fight](#), I was blown away by how often Georges St-Pierre—unquestionably one of THE absolute best fighters in the world—talked about fear. He says: *"Don't get me wrong: fear can be a good thing, and there's no way you can eliminate it from your life. In fact, eliminating fear from your life is a lie, or it's a mental illness. That's it, nothing more. Anyone who says they don't feel fear is a liar. Guys who say they don't feel fear are full of shit or they're plain crazy. Major denial issues."*

I remember hearing a story about soldiers going into battle and showing no fear, and the guy said it was really simple (I'm paraphrasing here): "There are two kinds of men: those

"It took me many more years to recognize that I couldn't win at everything. Abraham Lincoln lost elections before becoming our great president. Henry Ford went bankrupt before creating the automobile company that bears his name. Babe Ruth failed to get a hit the majority of times he came to the plate. Michael Jordan missed as many shots as he made. If those at the top of their profession don't win in everything all the time, I think it's safe to say that neither will we."

~ Jerry Rice

who want to go out and fight—the crazy ones—and the ones who are afraid to go, but they go anyway. They're the courageous ones.' I realized at this moment that it takes fear to make a person courageous. And I like that, because courage says something about you.

The result is that, after a while, you get practice at being courageous. You understand how to move forward against fear, how to react in certain situations. You just get better. It doesn't mean you stop feeling fear—that would be careless—but it means you have earned the right to feel confidence in the battle against fear."

Sounds like he and Jerry Rice traded notes, eh?

And they all must have read Aristotle's wisdom on the fact that courage isn't the ABSENCE of fear, it's the willingness to do what needs to be done whether you feel like it or not.

Which leads us to David Reynolds who (in [Constructive Living](#)) tells us, "Anyone who says he isn't afraid of anything is both stupid and lying."

So... Feeling any fear in your life? Fantastic. You're in good company.

How about we treat fear like the REVERSE INDICATOR it is, chant "Bring it on!" and ask ourselves, "Now what needs to be done?"

VOICES IN OUR HEADS SHOUTING: "NEVER QUIT!"

"Coach Davis used to run us up and down hills every day after practice as either a form of conditioning or punishment, forty yards up, and forty yards down. Guys would be throwing up on the way up *and* down. I remember after practice one day I decided to run some more hills to get in better condition on my own. I started up the slope, sweating profusely in the hot August sun of Mississippi, and said, 'I give up.' I was so tired and hot I walked back down the hill and headed to the locker room to hang it up for the day. But the voices in my head started to talk. 'Never quit!' I kept hearing over and over again. I stopped walking, turned around, and started running the hills again.

Before the following season, my junior year, I knew what I needed to do to get better; I worked hard in the off season to get faster and stronger. I watched the upperclassmen as I waited for my opportunity. Some summer days I would be up at dawn, work all day long with my father and brothers laying brick, get dropped off at school for practice, and then have to run the ten miles home because I had no ride. The run home was often in pitch darkness and the route took me along the woods. It was silent and dark and the littlest sounds from the woods scared me to death. So I would pick up my pace.

I had to be the best to prove myself to Coach Davis and to my teammates."

Two things here.

First, that voice in Jerry's head telling him "Never quit!" reminds me of a voice in a Navy SEAL's head.

In his book [Unleash the Warrior Within](#), Richard Machowicz tells us how he approached Hell Week during SEAL training: "Still, if you want to be a Navy SEAL, you have to go through it. I wanted more than anything to be part of the premier special operations unit in the United States military, perhaps the world. What I learned through the experience, and from the resulting ten-year SEAL career, is this: If you want something bad enough, you have the power to make it happen—no matter what other people have to say, no matter how tough the odds at first appear to be. I'm not telling you this to make you feel good. I'm not telling you this because it sounds nice. I'm telling you this because I know it's true. I've lived it. And you can, too."

He told himself, "The only way I'm not finishing is if I quit or die. And I'm not quitting." He shortened that into a mantra: "Not dead, can't quit." (He shortened *that* into "NDCQ.")

*"It's all about the competition. I *love* competition. Sprinters set world records not when they are on the track alone but when they are pushed against top-flight competition. But competition does more than get your juices flowing—it makes you better."*

~ Jerry Rice

"Going all the way back to high school, I always had trouble sleeping before games. I was usually so pumped up and anxious that sleeping became a luxury."

~ Jerry Rice

Quick check in: What are the voices in YOUR head telling YOU?

That's the first thing that came to mind as I read that epic section—thinking of the teenage-version of Jerry Rice hammering those hills in the humid heat of the deep south.

Then I thought of the hills themselves as the perfect metaphor for his greatness. As we discuss often, *mediocrity* literally means "to be stuck in the middle of a rugged mountain."

Jerry COULD have listened to the voice that said, "Meh, I'm good enough. Practice is over. What am I doing out here?" Of course, he didn't listen to that voice. And... The rest is history.

So, again, quick check in: What are the voices in YOUR head telling YOU?

Here's to getting clear on what's important to us and showing up like we mean it.

... Oh, and if your voice isn't loud enough, how about mine? NEVER QUIT!!

P.S. Jerry went to a super-small school called Mississippi Valley State. He was an All-American but, come NFL Draft Day he didn't know if he'd even be drafted. Think about that for a moment. One of the greatest NFL players ever didn't even know if he'd be drafted.

Now imagine him watching ESPN alone with his brother. His mom was cleaning houses to make some extra money. The woman whose house she was cleaning insisted his mom watch ESPN. His dad was laying bricks and missed his son being drafted 16th by the defending Super Bowl Champion San Francisco 49ers whose genius coach Bill Walsh saw something special in Jerry and traded a 1st, 2nd and 3rd round pick to get him.

GROWTH, GRIT AND DAILY ALL-OUT EFFORT

"My freshman year, I just tried to keep my head down and my mouth closed and to work hard. I knew there were teammates more talented than me, but I vowed that no one would outwork me. I was also very coachable, willing to take criticism from coaches and veteran players and tinker with my technique. ... I soaked up everything I could. For one pass route for a wide receiver, I might learn five different ways to run it. Too many of us turn a deaf ear to criticism because of ego, even when we know it is warranted, but I was always willing to listen if it would make me a better player. ..."

One thing that hit me that first season was the varying degrees of work ethic on a team. There were some guys who gave 100 percent every day in practice and others who just exerted enough effort to get by. It pissed me off. I couldn't understand how anybody could *not* give an all-out effort daily. And I'm talking off the field as well."

One thing that jumped out at me as I read the book was the fact that Jerry is an ASTONISHING exemplar of both the growth mindset in action and grit. (As in, he's a *poster child* for both.)

Carol Dweck is the Godmother of the growth mindset. In [Mindset](#) and [Self-theories](#) she walks us through just how important it is to approach life with the sense that you CAN get better.

I just re-read our Notes on [Mindset](#). It's (laughing) literally the scientific description of Jerry Rice and his attitude. I feel like copying and pasting the whole thing here. Alas, I can't. So, if you feel so inspired, go read/reread it!!

For now, a nibble: "People in the growth mindset don't just **seek** challenge, they thrive on it."

Then, of course, Angela Duckworth is our fairy Godmother of [Grit](#). She tells us that "talent" (which is, as she defines it, the inborn ability to pick things up quickly) is important but that EFFORT counts twice. Her math? Talent x Effort = Skill. Skill x Effort = Achievement.

Jerry is **Mr. Grit**. He took his Talent and, via EXTRAORDINARY EFFORT, converted every ounce of it into Skill. Then he took that Skill and, via EXTRAORDINARY EFFORT, converted every ounce of it into Hall of Fame, best-ever Achievement.

How about you? How's your growth mindset? How's your grit?

AN ODE TO PRACTICING HOW YOU WANT TO PLAY

"How you practice = How you play."
~ Jerry Rice

"How you practice = How you play.

It's that simple. I don't care if we're talking about basketball or ballet, cooking or checkers. The way in which you prepare for a challenge is usually related to your success in that same challenge. If the level at which you practice is commensurate with the task, then on 'game day,' you'll be fine.

When I first joined the San Francisco 49ers, I brought with me something that I had adopted early on in my football career: running out every catch in practice. So even after the most simple receiving route and catch, I would go full speed toward the end zone. I know many of the veterans thought I was crazy or that I was a hot dog trying to show them up, but it's the only way I know how to practice—to treat it like a game. Sure enough, some of my teammates took my lead and before long we were all running out every play in practice. That's not a testament to me, but an ode to practicing the way you want to play."

Time for another visual.

Imagine Jerry Rice as a rookie with the defending Super Bowl Champion 49ers. He shows up at the first practice. He catches the ball after his first simple receiving route of the first practice of his rookie season.

And then he runs full speed to the end zone. Touchdown. Repeat. For his entire career.

He NEVER caught the ball after a route in practice without acting like he was in a game and going all out (!) for a touchdown. <- That's crazy awesome.

I wonder if that has anything to do with how he racked up the most receiving touchdowns in NFL history. Not counting the touchdowns he had in practice (hah), Jerry holds the record with 197 touchdowns over his 20-year career. That's over 25% more than the next guy. (Randy Moss with 156 for curious souls.)

Of course, this Idea has nothing to do with Jerry and his touchdowns. It's all about you.

How are YOU showing up? Any room for a little more (grounded) intensity?

-> Touchdown!

RECORD-SETTING PROCESS

"In the postgame locker room interviews, I credited my teammates and, though honored by the record and the comparisons to Jim Brown, I still was not impressed with myself. In fact, later that night, back at home, I did what I always did after a game—played it back in mind. I thought about what I did well on certain plays and what I could have done better on others. The next day, I was at the practice facility a few hours before the rest of the crew, working out. I never paused to admire what I had done."

That paragraph comes right after a section in which Jerry describes the game in which he broke the prior touchdown record.

I'm sharing it because a) It's an astonishing demonstration of a man committed to his process; and, b) His post-game Optimization routine reminds me of [Lanny Bassham](#)'s wisdom regarding how he recommends we approach post-game analysis with ourselves and with our kids.

He has three steps: 1. What went well? Celebrate it. 2. What needs work? Identify it. 3. What will you do differently next time? Get to work on it.

"I am committed to my life.
Life is short. So commit
yourself to making the most
out of the time that you
have."

~ Jerry Rice

THE BEST YOU

"Many columnists, talk radio hosts, and other media types had already begun to declare that I was the greatest receiver in the history of football. Simply the best. Though it's flattering to think that, I know it's not necessarily true. ... To this day, I have never believed I was the best receiver ever. There were so many greats that came before me, and there are some incredible talents still suiting up. If I ever did believe I was the best, then complacency would have set in.

Who is the best actor of all time? The greatest dancer of our generation? The best golfer or basketball player or hockey star? How about the best author or painter or singer? What does best even mean? The dictionary may describe best as being better than all others—an unequal among peers, if you will. But who decides that? How can you ever truly know who is the best at something?"

Who's "the best." <- When used to compare one individual to another, it quickly becomes an unsolvable and, ultimately, useless debate.

Although Jerry was SUPER competitive and he doesn't directly address this perspective in the book, it's clear to me that, ultimately, his standard of excellence wasn't based on something outside of himself. He was ASTONISHINGLY committed to expressing the best version of himself moment to moment to moment.

And, as it turns out, when you do that as intensely and consistently as he did for such a long time, you might just wind up being "the best."

For our purposes, how about we use his inspiring example as fuel for our own self-mastery and Optimization in pursuit of that "best" version within us that's always waiting to be expressed?

Here's to running our receiving routes impeccably as we go full speed toward the end zone today!

B

Brian Johnson,
Professional Optimizer

About the Author of "Go Long"

JERRY RICE WITH BRIAN CURTIS



Jerry Rice is among the most iconic and awarded athletes in NFL history. Of his many record-breaking statistics this wide receiver compiled in his celebrated career, none is more hallowed than his all-time touchdown mark of 208. Rice won three Super Bowls with the 49ers and was MVP in the 49ers' Super Bowl XXIII win. Rice was inducted into Canton in 2010, and his jersey No. 80 is retired by the 49ers. He is also the author of *Go Long!: My Journey Beyond the Game and the Fame*. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area in California.



Brian Curtis is a New York Times bestselling author who has contributed to *Sports Illustrated*. He is the author or coauthor of several books, including *Fields of Battle: Pearl Harbor, the Rose Bowl and the Boys Who Went to War*; *The Legacy Letters: Messages of Life and Hope from 9/11 Family Members* and *Go Long!: My Journey Beyond the Game and Fame* (with Jerry Rice). Curtis was nominated for two local Emmys for his work as a reporter for Fox Sports Net and served as a national reporter for CBS College Sports.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.

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