

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Exceptionalism**  
“Unusual; not typical.”

**Message from God**  
It’s all good. Just work hard.

**Train It and Trust It**  
Anti-choke potion.

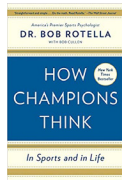
**Enthusiasm**  
The catalyst of champions.

**Create Your Own Reality**  
Like exceptional people do.

**How Champions Think**  
Life is a precious gift.

*“I’m always telling people that I don’t care what their families or their schools or their communities said or thought about them. I tell them, ‘You’re an adult now, and you get to decide.’ So what’s the decision going to be? You get to write your life story. Will you be heroic or just someone trying to get by? Will you be the star or someone sitting on the end of the bench?”*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella



# How Champions Think

In Sports and in Life

BY DR. BOB ROTELLA · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2016 · 304 PAGES

“I have been privileged to spend my life helping people who want to be exceptional. A desire to be exceptional may not in itself strike you as unusual. Everyone, as a kid, has daydreams in which he catches the touchdown pass as time expires to win the Super Bowl, or she pole-vaults sixteen feet to win an Olympic gold medal. But I’m not talking about the unrealized fantasies of many adults. I’m talking about a desire so fierce that it changes a person’s life. Exceptional people begin with just such ambitions. From them, I’ve learned how a champion’s thoughts are different from the thoughts of most people. That difference is what this book is all about.”

~ Dr. Bob Rotella from *How Champions Think*

Dr. Bob Rotella is widely recognized as the world’s leading sports psychologist. He’s coached everyone from basketball stars like LeBron James to rock stars like Seal. The golfers he’s coached (including greats like Rory McIlroy) have won an astonishing 80+ major championships.

In this book, he tells us, as the title suggests, *How Champions Think*—in, as the sub-title suggests, *both* sports AND in life.

Although we covered his uber-bestselling classic [Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect](#) (check out those Notes), I hadn’t heard of this newer book until [Ben Bergeron](#) referenced it in [Chasing Excellence](#). So, of course, I immediately Amazoned it and immediately read it.

It’s a SUPER-inspiring read. I highly recommend it if you’re into peak performance in general and *especially* if you’re into becoming a Champion at whatever it is you do. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it’s packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites we can apply to our World Champion Training Camps, so let’s jump straight in!

## CHAMPION THINKING 101: EXCEPTIONALISM

“The vital importance of that sort of attitude is the foremost thing I have learned about exceptionalism in my decades of work with people striving to be great. Talent, conventionally defined, is of course part of the equation. As Bear Bryant once said, ‘When was the last time you saw a jackass win the Kentucky Derby?’ But there are many people with physical talent, just as there are many people with raw intelligence. I would venture that most people are talented in something, whether they realize it or not. What sets the merely talented people apart from exceptional people can’t be measured by vertical leap, or time for the forty-yard dash, or length off the tee, or IQ. It’s something internal. Great performers share a way of thinking, a set of attitudes and attributes like optimism, confidence, persistence, and strong will. They all want to push themselves to see how great they can become. These attributes and attitudes cause champions to work harder and smarter than other people as they prepare for competition. They help them stay focused under pressure and to produce their best performances when the stakes are the highest.”

That’s from the first chapter in which we meet LeBron James and his #1 asset: His mind.

*" Striving to be exceptional is never easy. But when people tell me that what I'm suggesting they do won't be easy, I just say, 'You're right!' Going after big ideas takes sweat. It takes persistence, patience, and a bedrock belief in yourself. Not everyone will do it. That's why we call it being exceptional."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

Rotella tells a story about the first time he met LeBron. He knew the basics about LeBron. Six-eight. A chiseled two hundred fifty pounds with explosive speed. A proven superstar. But it wasn't until they sat down and chatted that he REALLY got LeBron's power.

Rotella asked him about his goals. LeBron told him: *"I want to be the greatest basketball player in history."* Rotella thought: *"Beautiful. This is a truly talented guy."* He says: *"It was not that he had physical gifts. It was LeBron's mind."* Specifically, it was the way he saw himself that most moved Rotella: *"The vital importance of that sort of attitude is the foremost thing I have learned about exceptionalism in my decades of work with people striving to be great."*

Speaking of exceptionalism, if you flip through my copy of the book, you'll see all the times I circled the word "exceptional." It felt like I underlined/circled that word every page.

*Exceptional. Exceptional.*

And, guess what? If we want to be exceptional we have to believe we can be "an exception" to the norm and then be willing to be, as per the definition of the word, "unusual; not typical."

Are you?

P.S. After LeBron told Rotella he wanted to be the greatest basketball player in history (!!!), Rotella asked him where he thought he stood in relation to that goal. LeBron told him he thought he was doing pretty well but that he wasn't going to be the greatest if his teams didn't win championships and they weren't going to do that unless he became a better three-point shooter.

Long story short: Rotella told him to create a video montage of him nailing threes from every spot on the court. Set it to music. Watch it every night. FEEL it. Program his subconscious mind.

And, he told him to hire a shooting coach, work with him every day and make two hundred three-point shots off the dribble every day while imagining the best defender guarding him. Then make another two hundred catch-and-shoot three-pointers. *"I told him I didn't care how many shots it took to make those four hundred three-pointers, or how long it took. If he wanted to be great, he would find the time and find the energy."*

Rotella continues: *"The actual number of shots I suggested was not as important, in my mind, as the idea that LeBron would set a practice goal for himself, commit to achieving it every day, and wait patiently for the results."*

Of course, this Idea has nothing to do with LeBron James and his three-pointers. It has to do with YOU. In what domain are you committed to being *exceptional*? Where do you think you stand in relation to that goal? And what do you think you need to do every day (!!) to have a shot at being your exceptional best?

Find the time. Find the energy. Be an exception. Be exceptional.

P.P.S. Speaking of three-pointers, how about some wisdom from Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant's mental toughness coach, [George Mumford](#)? In [The Mindful Athlete](#) he tells us: *"Every high-performing mindful athlete knows that if you want to achieve something, there's a good chance that you can, no matter what, if—and this is a big if—you're willing to pay the price. You not only have to focus on your intention, but you also have to be willing to get up early in the morning and do the same thing thousands and thousands of times—and then another thousand times—with intention. Which leads me to deliberate practice. ..."*

*When I worked with Kobe Bryant, he was making about thirteen hundred three-pointers a day in the off-season when he was working on his three-point shot."*

P.P.P.S. LeBron went from being a 29% three-point shooter in his rookie season to a 40% beast.

*" After years of thought and research about the human mind and human behavior, William James wrote this: ' People tend to become what they think about themselves.' There is enormous wisdom in that sentence. And there is enormous hope."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

## GOD: IT'S ALL GOOD; JUST KEEP WORKING ON YOUR GAME

*"It's almost as if exceptional people belong to a special club. In this club, the members know that the average person limits himself. They know that the exceptional person is exceptional in large part because he doesn't limit himself."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

"Some of my clients have a hard time envisioning themselves with this much confidence. If they're golfers, I sometimes suggest to them that they imagine that God appeared to them and said, 'You're going to have a great career. You're going to win dozens of tournaments. You're going to win several major championships. Don't worry about it. You just keep working hard on your game. I've taken care of the results.' And then imagine that the vision ended before the golfer could ask God which tournaments he would win and when he would win them.

He'd play from that time on with tremendous confidence. He wouldn't know exactly when his wins would come, or where. But he'd know that if he just kept doing the things he was supposed to do, the results were guaranteed. He'd step up to the first tee every Thursday thinking, 'Oh, boy! I can't wait to find out if this is going to be one of my weeks.'

If you want to transform your life, if you want to grow, you have to change the way you see yourself and the way you respond to the world around you—just as surely as you would if God appeared to you and told you everything was set.

The truth is you don't need to wait for divine intervention to have that sort of confidence. The miracle has already happened, in the creation of the human brain. You need to take responsibility for using it and give confidence to yourself."

That's from a chapter called "A Confident Self-Image." <- Rotella tells us that's ESSENTIAL.

I love that vision of God appearing to the golfer and letting him know that he was going to have a super-successful career—winning dozens of tournaments and several major championships. No need to worry about it. Just focus on working hard. Results are taken care of!

Then... Poof! Gone before we can ask WHICH tournaments we'd win. So... We just need to do the work and show up excited every day and wonder if today was the day. Before we go on, let's do that little exercise. Imagine God appearing before you right now. What would God tell YOU?

Seriously ... Take a moment... What did God say?!? :)

That whole idea reminds me of another legendary golf story told by another legendary mental toughness coach: [Lanny Bassham](#). Check out this +1 called [Did I win?](#) for the full story.

Short story: Lanny's working with a golfer. He's struggling. Hasn't won in awhile. Even though Lanny's book is called "[With Winning In Mind](#)," Lanny tells him to not even think about winning. They come up with a training program and a process he will follow with every shot.

Fast-forward to a tournament early that year. Final hole of the tournament. Our golfer makes the putt. Suddenly his wife runs onto the green and hugs him. He's a little confused. Not sure what's up, he asks, "Did I win?" Yah. You just won \$1 million. Nice work.

THAT's the level of focus we want to have on doing our best. How's yours?

P.S. As I said in the intro, I got this book after reading a Rotella quote in *Chasing Excellence*. Here's how Ben Bergeron defines confidence in his great book: "*Confidence is what happens when you make the most challenging keys to success part of the daily grind and stick with the character traits unwaveringly.*"

Yep. Identify what needs the most work. Do it tenaciously. That's a good source of confidence.

P.P.S. We actually have a class on both [Confidence 101](#) + [Self-Image 101](#).

## TRAIN IT AND TRUST IT

"The principle I teach to golfers and other athletes is 'Train it and trust it,' which means 'Learn the skill thoroughly, so it's ingrained in your subconscious. Then, at the moment of performance,

*"Jack [Nicklaus] told the golf team... 'You have to be a legend in your own mind before you can be a legend in your own time.'"*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

*"In sports or in business, if you're not aspiring to dominate, to be the very best, you're coasting. And you can only coast in one direction."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

don't think about it. Trust that your subconscious brain will do its job.' But the trusting won't work if the training hasn't happened. Nor will it work if you confuse the subconscious with negative thoughts, fears, or doubts. No matter how much practice a golfer has done to groove a good putting stroke and routine, his stroke will change for the worse if he's doubtful or fearful about a putt. He has to be confident, to believe in his abilities."

That's from a chapter called "Commitment, Perseverance, and Habit."

Here's our new mantra: "Train it and trust it." Let's take a quick look at both parts.

**1. Train it.** I'm reminded of some wisdom from Lanny Bassham's son, [Troy](#). In his book [Attainment](#), Troy tells us that average performers practice until they can get something right. ELITE performers, on the other hand, practice until they *can't get it wrong*. <- Powerful!

(Troy also tells us that "Elite performers work hard in preparation and easy in competition."—which pretty much *perfectly* captures the whole "Train it and trust it" ethos, eh?)

**2. Trust it.** So, we train it until we can't get it wrong. It's firmly programmed into our subconscious. Then, when it comes time to perform, we TRUST it. In [Overachievement, Jon Eliot](#) tells us the same thing: we need to have a "Training Mindset" AND a "Trusting Mindset."

And, this seems like a good place to share some wisdom from the world's leading scientist who studies peak performance and its opposite: choking. In her book [Choke, Sian Beilock](#) tells us: "Holding on to thoughts and worries under stress leads to an inability to perform the tasks you are faced with, and learning how to control your mind so that you are able to hone your attention to what matters (and only what matters) is a real key to success under pressure."

Yep. Champions train it. Then trust it. How about YOU? How's your training? Your trusting? How can you Optimize a bit more today?

P.S. Here's a fun little Pro Tip: Rotella often has his golfers gently smile right before they putt. That subtle physical action turns off their worried mind so they can relax and do what they do best. So... The next time you're in a pressure situation, if you're feeling so inspired, take a deep breath, say, "I'm excited!" then... SMILE, trust it, and let it rip! :)

## ENTHUSIASM: THE CATALYST OF CHAMPIONS

"To borrow an analogy from chemistry, enthusiasm acts like a catalyst that makes all the other attributes of a champion's mind work better. Persistence, to take one important example, is so much easier when you're enthused about what you're doing. Sticking with something you love is like biking downhill. Sticking with something you don't love is like biking uphill."

This is the quote from *Chasing Excellence* that led me to this book: "Sticking with something you love is like biking downhill. Sticking with something you don't love is like biking uphill."

[Angela Duckworth](#) would agree. She tells us that grit is the ultimate hallmark of great performers in any domain. As we discuss in our Notes on her classic book [Grit](#), she says grit has two parts: Intense passion and intense perseverance. (Emphasis on *intense* for both of those qualities.)

Note: The passion (or enthusiasm) she describes isn't the fireworks display kind of passion that shows up and then disappears a few seconds later. It's a deep, stable, grounded passion for whatever it is you choose to dedicate your life to that's more like a COMPASS than fireworks.

And, again, that passion is INTENSE. Why is that important? Again: "Sticking with something you love is like biking downhill. Sticking with something you don't love is like biking uphill."

Rotella tells us that we either need to do what we love or love what we do. And, he reminds us that it's not easy—even for Champions—to MAINTAIN that enthusiasm. Yet, they find a way to bring enthusiasm to what they do every day.

*"People who go for greatness are going to get knocked down a lot. They'll have difficult times. They'll struggle with doubt and uncertainty. People around them will question the wisdom of their quest. The issue is not whether you'll fail, because you will. It's whether you'll get back up and keep going. It's whether you can sustain your self-confidence and your belief in yourself and keep bouncing back. Failure is only final when you stop striving."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

*"But as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, nothing great has ever been achieved without enthusiasm. Somewhere and somehow, exceptional people find the way to bring that enthusiasm to what they do, and they find it every day."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

*"I don't see a lot of exceptional people whom I'd characterize as well-rounded. I see a lot more people who are very single-minded. They have a passion for one thing, and they pursue it zealously. They generally reserve time for family when they're not pursuing their passion. But that's about all the spare time they have."*

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

So... How's your enthusiasm? How can you turn it up a notch and catalyze everything else?

## CREATE YOUR OWN REALITY

"One of the concepts I struggle with when I work with people both inside and outside of sport is reality. ... My job with such people is to get them to understand and believe that exceptional people create their own reality. The average person won't set a goal unless he thinks, and people close to him think, that he has at least a fifty-fifty chance of reaching it. That's what the average person considers a realistic goal. The average person takes account of all the information that's out there saying he can't do something. If, let's say, he thinks about committing himself to becoming the best basketball player he can be and getting a college scholarship, he'll be aware of the fact that maybe one high school player in thirty gets a college scholarship. Since that seems to make the odds a lot worse than fifty-fifty, the average person is likely to give up on that goal before he even commits to trying to reach it, settling for mediocrity in high school and giving up the game thereafter.

The exceptional person, the person who does great things, doesn't see things that way. The exceptional person has a vision—of great performances, of a great career, of a great something—and doesn't care about what others might say or think. He ignores information that suggests his dream is unrealistic. He just sets about making that vision a reality. He sees things before others see them. He creates his own reality. Afterward, other people may say to him, 'We knew you could do it. We always sensed you were going to be one of the great ones.' But that's probably not what he heard in the beginning. In the beginning, he probably heard, 'You have to be crazy to think you can do that.'"

Rotella says: Average people are "realistic." Exceptional people CREATE their reality.

The whole statistics chat reminds me of [Bernard Roth](#)'s wisdom from *The Achievement Habit* where he tells us: "Statistics show you trends, they can't predict your life. Likewise, consider that the odds have always been against greatness. If one were to decide on a career path just by the odds of financial success, we would have no movie stars, authors, poets, or musicians. The odds of any one person becoming a professional, self-supporting musician are very low—and yet turn on the radio and you hear hundreds of them. The odds were against the Beatles, Elvis, and the Grateful Dead, too. They could have been 'scientific' about the whole thing and chosen more reasonable career paths, and what a loss for the world that would have been!

If you succeed, the odds are then meaningless. Any path may have a 2 percent success rate, yet if you're in that 2 percent, there's a 100 percent chance of success for you. The long shots are often the most rewarding."

Jon Eliot echoes this wisdom in *Overachievement*: "History, though, shows us that the people who end up changing the world—the great political, social, scientific, technological, artistic, even sports revolutionaries—are always nuts, until they're right, and then they're geniuses."

How's your reality? Time to create a better one?

## HOW CHAMPIONS THINK

"The honest competitor understands that while luck affects outcomes, it doesn't affect effort. So he learns to take his pleasure from the daily grind. He understands that life is sometimes going to break his heart. ... He decides to take his satisfaction from the effort he produces every day, and because he controls his attitude, he gets enormous pleasure from it. He may or may not win ultimate prizes—the championship, the CEO job, the Oscar—but because he has chosen an endeavor that he loves and has talent for, he sees progress every day. He's proud of that. He's happy with that.



"Once an individual has a philosophy, he should be ready to answer the question 'What if I fail?' He should understand that over the span of a lifetime, the only lasting failure is the failure to try. He appreciates the opportunity to find out what he can do with his life and career."

~ Dr. Bob Rotella

Viewed in that perspective, life for anyone living in a country like America, a country blessed with peace and prosperity, can be a never-ending treat. You get a chance to see how good you can be at something you love doing. You get to have a ball for many years seeing how many wonderful things you can do with your life.

On top of that, you'll be blessed with peace of mind. You'll be calm and composed when things aren't going well. You'll handle the good things with grace. You'll find that in crises, things slow down. You'll have the sense that the world is your home court. You'll be comfortable competing there. When you retire, you'll like the face you see in the mirror. You'll go on to the next phase of your life and look for new things to learn, new things to do. And on your last day, you'll look back and think how lucky you were to have lived the life you did. That's how champions think."

Those are the final words of the book. They *perfectly* capture the spirit of how Rotella and his Champions think.

Ultimately, here's what Dr. Rotella says we need to know: Life is a precious (!!!) gift. We're blessed with an opportunity to see just how good we can be at something we love doing. We get to have a ball for many years seeing how many wonderful things we can do with our lives.

We may or may not win the external prizes, but when we live like that, we win the ultimate prize: Peace of mind. Or, as the Greeks called it, *euthymia*—a deep sense of tranquility that comes as the result of trusting ourselves and living in integrity with our highest ideals.

<- THAT, of course, is the ultimate challenge—a game played in the arena of life in which we constantly strive to be a better version of ourselves, racing to catch up with that *Optimus* version of us that's (wonderfully!) (always!) just out of reach.

At the end of *that* life (and at the end of each day in between now and then), we can look back and think how lucky we were to have lived the lives we did.

Here's to playing that game as well as we can, my fellow Champion!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Professional Optimizer*

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[Chasing Excellence](#)

[Overachievement](#)

[The Mindful Athlete](#)

[How Successful People Think](#)

[The Hoops Whisperer](#)

[With Winning in Mind](#)

[A Champion's Mind](#)

[Unbeatable Mind](#)

## About the Author of "How Champions Think"

DR. BOB ROTELLA



Rory McIlroy, Padraig Harrington and Darren Clarke all have something in common in addition to their victories in Majors. They are all clients of Dr. Bob Rotella. Internationally known for his work in the area of applied sports psychology, Dr. Rotella is consistently recognized as the Top Sports Psychologist in the world. Rotella's book, *Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect* is the best selling sport psychology book of all time and one of the three best selling golf books in history.

## 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](http://optimize.me).