

THE BIG IDEAS

Eight Medals

Eight virtues.

365 x 5

See you in the pool.

W.I.N.

What's important now?

Train Your Mind

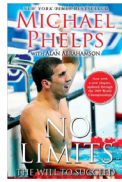
A few ideas on how to.

Time, Energy, Dedication

Heart, and soul.

Can't vs. Won't

There's a big difference.



No Limits

The Will to Succeed

BY MICHAEL PHELPS WITH ALAN ABRAHAMSON · FREE PRESS · © 2009 · 272 PAGES

“[Coach] Bob [Bowman]’s philosophy is rather simple: We do the things other people can’t or won’t, do. Bob’s expectations are simple, too. It’s like the quote he had up on the whiteboard one day at practice a few months before the Games. It comes from a business book but in sports it’s the same: ‘In business, words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises, but only performance is reality.’”

Bob is exquisitely demanding. But it is with him that I learned this essential truth: Nothing is impossible.

And this: Because nothing is impossible, you have to dream big dreams; the bigger, the better.

So many people along the way, whatever it is you aspire to do, will tell you it can’t be done. But all it takes is imagination.

You dream. You plan. You reach.

There will be obstacles. There will be doubters. There will be mistakes.

But with hard work, with belief, with confidence and trust in yourself and those around you, there are no limits. Perseverance, determination, commitment, and courage—those things are real. The desire for redemption drives you. And the will to succeed—it’s everything. That’s why, on the pool deck in Beijing in the summer of 2008, there were sometimes no words, only screams.

Because, believe it, dreams really can come true.”

~ Michael Phelps from *No Limits*

“If you put a limit on anything, you put a limit on how far you can go. I don’t think anything is too high... If you think about doing the unthinkable, you can. The sky is the limit... Anything is possible. I deliberately set very high goals for myself; I work very hard to get there.”

~ Michael Phelps

[Michael Phelps](#) is an American swimmer who is the most decorated Olympic athlete in history.

He captivated the world during the 2008 Olympics when he won an unprecedented eight (!!) gold medals. I vividly remember tuning in to watch just after Alexandra and I had landed for our year in Bali. Incredibly inspiring demonstration of human potential.

In this book, Michael walks us through his “No Limits” thinking and EXTRAORDINARY hard work ethic that enabled him to create history.

It’s literally a case study in deliberate practice—highlighting his remarkable commitment to constantly improving and seeing just how much he can accomplish. If you’re into sports and biographies, I think you’ll love it. (Get the book [here](#).)

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

8 MEDALS | 8 VIRTUES

"Everyone has obstacles. I learned that early in life. But I also learned another essential truth early. Dedication, grit, and willpower could go a long way in meeting, and beating, whatever challenges I would face."
~ Michael Phelps

1. "Perseverance: The 400 Individual Medley"
2. Belief: The 400 Free Relay
3. Redemption: The 200 Freestyle
4. Determination: The 200 Fly
5. Confidence: The 800 Free Relay
6. Courage: The 200 Individual Medley
7. Will: The 100 Fly
8. Commitment: The Medley Relay"

Those are the chapter titles for the book.

8 virtues → 8 gold-medal winning events.

If you'd like to get yourself all fired up, you may want to watch a few of those events on YouTube. Check out gold medal #1: [The 400 Individual Medley](#) + #4 [The 200 Fly](#) (where his goggles filled up w/water and he couldn't see yet still won gold and set a world record) + #7: [The 100 Fly](#) (won by 1/100th of a second) + [The Medley Relay](#) (#8!).

Now let's look at Ideas on how Michael became the most decorated Olympian ever.

365 X 5: SEE YOU AT THE POOL

"Bob's coaching philosophy can be distilled as follows:

Set your goals high. Work conscientiously, every day, to achieve them.

Among the many authors Bob has read, he likes to cite the motivational speaker Earl Nightingale, who survived the attack on Pearl Harbor on the USS *Arizona*, then went on to a career in broadcasting. The way Bob tells it, Nightingale's work revealed the one thing that's common to all successful people: They make a habit of doing things that unsuccessful people don't like to do.

There are plenty of people with some amount of talent. Are you willing to go farther, work harder, be more committed and dedicated than anyone else?

If others were inclined to take Sunday off, well, that just meant we might be one-seventh better.

For five years, from 1998 to 2003, we did not believe in days off. I had one because of a snowstorm, two more due to the removal of wisdom teeth. Christmas? See you at the pool. Thanksgiving? Pool. Birthdays? Pool. Sponsor obligations? Work them out around practice time."

Wow.

It starts with setting your goals high. Phelps is known for the goal sheet he and his coach Bob Bowman would have each year—mapping out the precise times they wanted to hit in each event.

How's *your* goal sheet?

That's step 1. With clear goals set, now it's time to work conscientiously, EVERY day toward their achievement. Phelps and Bowman liked to see how many days of consistent, INTENSE training they could get in a row.

Which leads us to: "Successful people make a habit of doing things that unsuccessful people don't like to do."

This is certainly one ridiculously awesome way to do it:

7 days a week. 365 days a year. For 5 years.

Christmas? Thanksgiving? Birthday? See you at the pool.

(Reminds me of [Stephen King](#) who famously writes every.single.day. See Notes on [On Writing.](#))

How about you?

Have you set your goals high? Are you conscientiously taking a step toward their achievement every.single.day?

Here's to getting 1/7th better than our former selves.

See you at the pool!

W.I.N. = WHAT'S IMPORTANT NOW?

"If I wasn't in the right mood to practice, I got myself into that right mood."

~ Michael Phelps

"One thing that separates Michael from other swimmers, Bob likes to say, is that if they don't feel good they don't swim good.

That's not the way it is for Michael.

Michael, he says, performs no matter what he's feeling. He has practiced it for a long time. He knows exactly what he wants to get done, and he's able to compartmentalize what's important.

Bob, with his seemingly endless collection of sayings, naturally has an acronym to describe the mental aspect to my racing. It's 'W.I.N.': What's Important Now?

It's true. When it comes down to it, when the time comes to focus and be mentally prepared, I can do whatever it takes to get there, in any situation."

W.I.N.

That's genius.

The question to ask: What's important now?

NOT: What do I *feel* (insert whiney voice) like doing?

We come back to this again and again and I love the fact we now have a W.I.N.ning acronym.

[David Reynold](#)'s (see Notes on [Constructive Living](#)) tells us that any given moment calls for one simple question: Now what needs to be done?

Here's how [Eric Greitens](#) puts it in [Resilience](#) (see Notes): *"I told you that I was less interested in how you feel and more interested in who you want to be... I asked you to write down those same three words in the opposite direction. It's the direction that holds the most promise for your life:*

IDENTITY

ACTION

FEELINGS

You begin by asking, 'Who am I going to be?' You decided to be courageous again.

So what's next? Act that way. Act with courage. And here comes the part that's so simple it's easy to miss: the way you act will shape the way you feel. You act with courage and immediately your fears start to shrink and you begin to grow.

If you want to feel differently, act differently.

This ain't complicated, my friend. But it's amazing how many people get it so wrong for so long."

*"I knew that in my dreams
I always wanted it, and
though that under perfect
circumstances I could do
it. Just believing all along
that you can do it goes a
long way."*

~ Michael Phelps

Remember: IDENTITY → ACTIONS → FEELINGS. (Not Feelings → Action → Identity.)

And, finally, [Michael Beckwith](#) (see Notes on [Spiritual Liberation](#)) tells us: *"The gift of self-discipline is that it has the power to take you beyond the reasoning of temporary emotion to freedom. Think of how empowered you've felt on occasions when you haven't given in to the 'I don't feel like it' syndrome and honored your commitment to yourself. What does not feeling like it have to do with it? The combination of love for something with the willingness to do what it takes to practice it—discipline—results in freedom."*

Genius: What does *feeling* like it have to do with anything?

Let's W.I.N.

Decide what's important now. And do it.

TRAIN YOUR MIND

"At the highest level of sports, and especially at the Olympics, you have to expect that everyone competing against you has physical talent. So: How do you channel peak performance into championship performance? You have to be mentally tough, that's how."

How do you get mentally tough? You have to train your mind just like you train your body.

Unleash your imagination. Work hard. Embrace obstacles, difficulties, and mistakes."

In our growing [mental training](#) collection, we come back to the fact that 90% of athletic performance is mental. Yet, for some odd reason, most performers don't invest anywhere near the time you'd expect into their mental training.

Of course, the same holds true for *any* (and every!) performance in life.

Ultimately, whether we show up at our highest potential in pressure situations (whether that's with our spouse or kids or colleagues or ...) comes down to our mental strength. And the only way to build reliable, consistent strength is to TRAIN it.

Begs the question: Are *you* training *your* mind?

Here's how [George Mumford](#)—Michael Jordan + Kobe Bryant's mental toughness coach—puts it in his great book [The Mindful Athlete](#) (see Notes): *"Think about the eye of a hurricane, or the calm still center in the middle of a cyclone. No matter how intense the storm or what's swept up in its gale-force winds, that calm, blue center is always there. This is the metaphor I like to use when talking about the space between stimulus and response. We all have this quiet center within us. Mindfulness reconnects us to this center space, where we fully experience the present moment and have access to the transcendent wisdom that's often associated with conscious flow. In his book Man's Search for Meaning, neurologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl famously described it this way: 'Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'"*

Something happens. Do you have the ability to step in between the stimulus and your response to CHOOSE the most empowered response, or do you fly off the handle with an out of control knee jerk response?

How do you train *that*?

A few of my favorite practices: 1. Meditation + 2. Doing What Needs to Be Done + 3. The Equanimity Game.

1. Check out [Meditation 101](#) for the Why's + How's of meditation. Know that you're LITERALLY building grey matter with every minute you meditate. Bringing your attention back to your anchor is the equivalent of taking another rep... and another... and another...

"My goal was never to become the best athlete ever; it was simply to become the best athlete I could be."

~ Michael Phelps

2. Every single time you choose to do what needs to get done whether you feel like it or not, you're building your mental strength. Of course, if you have a habit of being guided by your emotions rather than your commitments, you're going to need to build up this muscle just as if you were hopping off the couch and training for a marathon.

But know that each time you get yourself to take impeccable action you're building a new, stronger identity. "That's like you!" to do the right thing. Let's build the self-image and mastery of a mentally strong champion.

3. And, [here's a quick look at the equanimity game](#). Basic idea: Anytime you find yourself off balance, see how fast you can restore your equanimity. Find the most empowered response to even the most mundane annoyances. Build your muscle for the small things so you can be strong enough for the big ones.

Here's to hitting the mind gym. Hard.

365 x Forever.

See you at the pool! :)

TIME, ENERGY, DEDICATION, HEART AND SOUL

"Nothing in life is easy. You can't wake up one day, announce you're going to do something, and expect it to be a success. At least not consistently. You have to put time and energy and whatever you've got into it. You have to want to do it, want it badly.

That's the point that perhaps some people who say they want something, whatever that something is, don't fully understand. A lot of swimmers I trained with said they wanted to achieve something great but didn't truly put time, energy, dedication, and heart into it.

I put time, energy, dedication, heart, and soul into it."

—> "You can't wake up one day, announce you're going to do something, and expect it to be a success."

Reminds me of [Todd Henry's](#) brilliant concept of "The Lag" in his equally brilliant book, [Die Empty](#) (see Notes). Here's how he puts it: "The lag is the gap between cause and effect. It's the season between planting a seed and reaping a harvest. It's the time when all the work you've done seems to have returned little to no visible reward, and there is little on the horizon to indicate that things are going to get better.

When you are in the lag, the only thing that keeps you moving forward are (a) confidence in your vision and ability to bring it to fruition, (b) a willingness to say no to other things that tempt you to divert from your course, and (c) daily, diligent, urgent progress."

Then there's being a hero in the beginning: *arambhashura*—one of my favorite words + Ideas.

In [The Art of Taking Action](#) (see Notes), [Gregg Krech](#) tells us: "It's not really the feeling of excitement itself which is the culprit here, it is the loss of excitement which then prompts us to abandon our efforts towards fulfillment of our dreams — dreams which were, at one time, very exciting to us. If anticipatory excitement moves us to action, the loss of excitement often prompts us to stop. Action dissolves into inaction.

Meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran tells us of a Sanskrit word — arambhashura — which means 'heroes at the beginning' — people who take up a job with a fanfare of trumpets but soon find that their enthusiasm has tiptoed down the back stairs."

What's your goal? How's your lag?

Let's do this!

"If everything that had happened after Beijing had taught me anything, it was this—I could do anything I set my mind to. I know I can still swim faster. I mean, why not?"

~ Michael Phelps

CAN'T VS. WON'T

"Growing up, I used to tell Bob when he would order a set that would make my eyes widen, I can't do that. He would say, there's a difference between 'can't' and 'won't.' Maybe you won't do that, he would then say. But you can.

If you say 'can't,' you're restricting what you can do or ever will do. You can use your imagination to do whatever you want. 'Can't,' he would say, that's a tough word..."

Can't vs. Won't.

There's a big difference between those two words.

Phelps tells the story of the GRUELING workouts Bowman would put him through. He'd get to a point where he'd literally feel like he couldn't move any more.

"... You can't see straight. Things are blurry. You feel like you can't move. But you can. That's what I came to understand. At that point it's pretty much just goals. If you want to meet your goals, this is what it takes."

How about *you*?

What do you REALLY want to do and give to the world? What will it take to get there?

Is it an issue "can't" or "won't"?

Here's to optimizing and actualizing our No Limits thinking and our can-do, will-do engine of action as we go out and see what we're truly capable of!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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[Unbeatable Mind](#)

[With Winning in Mind](#)

[The Strangest Secret](#)

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[On Writing](#)

About the Author of "No Limits"

MICHAEL PHELPS WITH ALAN ABRAHAMSON



Michael Phelps is an American swimmer. He holds the record for winning the most gold medals (eight) in a single Olympics (2008). He has won twenty-two Olympic medals, eighteen gold, two silver, and two bronze.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.