

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Impossible vs. Really Hard

Ride your bike to Everest lately?

### Spartan Up!

Go anti-fragile.

### The Cookie Test

Do you pass?

### Grit = Soul Food

Eat up!

### Grit 101

Time to rock it.

### Run, Jump, Climb

... and throw spears!

### Meet Mr. Burpee

The royal workout.

### The Best Way to Finish

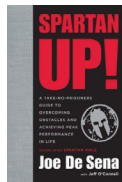
Is to start.

### Telephone Poles

Just get to the next one.

### Your Potential

It's time to realize it.



## Spartan Up!

A Take-No-Prisoners Guide to Overcoming Obstacles and Achieving Peak Performance in Life

BY JOE DE SENA AND JEFF O'CONNELL · HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT © 2014  
· 224 PAGES

“Challenging yourself to accomplish more than you know you can is never stupid — it helps show you what you are capable of. It creates a new frame of reference, one you can draw upon in the face of other things that are perceived as being tough in your life. It shows you possibilities you didn't know existed.

That's why I started the Spartan Race, and that's why I wrote this book.”

~ Joe De Sena from *Spartan Up!*

This book is simply awesome.

That is all.

Seriously. It's packed with goodness.

If you're like me, you'll have a hard time getting thru the first few pages without wanting to a) crank your life up by about 10 notches (Spartan Up!!) and b) sign up for a Spartan Race. (Get the book [here](#) + sign up for a race at [Spartan.com](#). :)

It's packed with great stories and equally great Big Ideas.

Let's jump straight in with a quick look at my favorites!

## IMPOSSIBLE VS. REALLY HARD

“Take the survival tale of Swedish adventurer Göran Kropp. In October 1995, he left Stockholm, Sweden, on a bicycle and rode it to the base of Mount Everest, arriving there in April 1996. He climbed Everest, reaching the summit with no oxygen mask and no help from Sherpas. He descended the mountain and eventually pedaled back to Sweden. If someone invited you to undertake such a wild adventure, you might say: “That's impossible!” or “You're crazy!” As it turns out, it's not impossible. It's hard — *really* hard — but doable under the right circumstances. The cliché is true: Where there's a will, there's a way. Seemingly unsurmountable challenges confronting your business, sports, health and fitness, and relationships are far more manageable than you might imagine.”

Laughing as I type this but that IS crazy!!

But not impossible.

Just *\*really\** hard.

What are *you* telling yourself is impossible? My hunch is it's a heck of a lot more doable than riding your bike to the Himalayas, hopping off and ascending Everest without any assistance. Oh, and then riding back home. (Just a hunch.)

What would your life look like if you stepped back and embraced the challenges you're facing and create even more exciting opportunities for growth?

Hmmmm....

*“Spartan up!”*

~ Joe De Sena

*" Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."*

~ Thomas Edison

*" Come what may, all bad fortune is to be conquered by endurance."*

~ Virgil

Let's remember [Seneca](#)'s wisdom—which perfectly echoes De Sena's: *"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult."*

Here's to daring!

## SPARTAN UP!

““Spartan up!” The title of this book is a phrase I bark at people every day in one situation or another. Those two words have a simple meaning: stop complaining and get it done! “Spartan up!” is an attitude, an X factor, a way of life that I would sum up like this: Challenges make me stronger. Failure makes me work harder. Knock me down, and, sure as a shit, I’m getting right back up.”

That's so good.

Reminds me of Nassim Taleb's genius book, *Anti-Fragile*.

Basic idea: We can be fragile, resilient or anti-fragile.

Imagine you're a package being sent in the mail.

If you're fragile, you have a big ol' sticker on you saying, *"I'm FRAGILE! Please handle with care. I break easily. Wah."*

If you're resilient, you have a sticker on you that says, *"I'm tough! You can handle me roughly and it'll at least take me a little longer to break!"*

If you're anti-fragile, you have a sticker that says, *"Kick me around, do whatever you want with me. The harsher you treat me, the STRONGER I get. #bam."*

Imagine that.

Imagine being ANTI-fragile such that challenges \*literally\* make you stronger.

That's what we want to be.

P.S. Remember this Taleb anti-fragile gem: *"Wind extinguishes a candle and energizes fire."*

## THE COOKIE TEST

“In the Spartan world, we have come to believe that in many cases, gratification is something that *must* be delayed to achieve success. This theory has been validated in the world of science, most notably in the form of what's famously called “the cookie experiment.” Cookies? Baking goodies doesn't sound very Spartan, but it has everything to do with the Spartan mentality and underpinnings of our philosophy. It's also one of the keys to unlocking success in life.

In 1972, a Stanford researcher by the name of Walter Mischel hatched an idea for an experiment that has since become famous and is studied and debated to this day. Mischel would give children their preferred treat: a marshmallow, a cookie, or a pretzel. He would tell them they could eat it right away — or wait fifteen minutes and eat two instead. A simple choice. He then tracked their subsequent success as the children matured into adulthood. As it turns out, those kids who refused the first cookie became more successful adults than those who took it. Cookie refusers became winners.”

The cookie test.

[Daniel Goleman](#) talks about this in his seminal book, *Emotional Intelligence* (see Notes).

Goleman identifies the ability to delay gratification as one of \*the\* keys to emotional intelligence and tells us: *"There is perhaps no psychological skill more fundamental than resisting impulse."*

And get this: Whether or not the child could resist their impulse and delay gratification (at

*"Eat food. Not too much.  
Mostly plants."  
~ Michael Pollan*

FOUR years old!), was "twice as powerful a predictor of what their SAT scores will be as is IQ at age four; IQ becomes a stronger predictor of SAT only after children learn to read."

Good news: We can cultivate our ability to control our impulses and delay our gratification.

Even better news: As De Sena advises throughout the book, pretty much every moment gives us an opportunity to practice.

Hit snooze or hop out of bed? Do the workout you said you'd do or skip it? Meditate or convince yourself you're just too busy today? Eat the food you know is best for you or go for the junk?

Moment to moment to moment.

Let's cultivate our willpower, learn to delay gratification and crush it. :)

## GRIT = SOUL FOOD

"There's strength, and then there's Spartan strength, the ability to commit to working for a long period of time without any concrete evidence that it will pay off — doing it because you want to, not because you have to. Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful campaign for Indian sovereignty required Spartan strength, because there were many times when it looked like it was going nowhere. India still hadn't gained independence from Britain when Gandhi died — he never saw the two cookies. But still he persevered for his entire life.

Spartan strength relates to a term I discussed earlier: grit, an innate trait that nonetheless can become ingrained through dedication and application. Grit refers to an indefatigable will to overcome obstacles... Think of it this way:

- Spartan strength is the determination that arises out of true commitment.
- Grit is the assertion and application of will to fulfill that commitment.

Spartan strength emerges out of a psychic alignment to get something done. That alignment is determined and unbreakable: this is just what is going to be. Grit emerges out of the force of will that manifests action. Grit is execution. Grit actually gets shit done."

*"An indefatigable will to overcome obstacles."*

Grit.

Grit is \*the\* greatest predictor of success. We know this scientifically. Researcher Angela Duckworth describes it as intense passion + intense persistence.

She tells us: "Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina."

*"Here's the one Spartan rule  
you must live by: "If your  
great grandparents didn't eat  
it, you probably shouldn't  
eat it."*

~ Joe De Sena

How's your grit?

Let's cultivate some Gandhi-style GRIT and leave the cookies for later as we fiercely commit and execute.

## GRIT 101

"For some, becoming gritty may be an easy transition. For others, it may require more conscious effort. Do you want more grit? Start here:

1. Write out your plan for success. Establish your baseline, set a goal, define a clear path toward that goal.
2. Share the plan. The recipient should be someone who is supportive yet can offer constructive criticism when needed. If necessary, hire a coach.

*"The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing."*

~ Walt Disney

3. Eliminate distractions. What are your barriers? TV, Internet, video games?
4. Keep a journal of your successes and failures. Remember the days when you would receive a gold star for exceptional performance in grade school? Give yourself a gold star for every success you have during the day.
5. Adjust as needed, as long as it doesn't diminish or change your original goal. Always work on solutions.
6. Last but not least, don't give up. Don't let setbacks become failures. Learn from them and keep moving forward. You must remain committed to your goals."

That's a pretty awesome crash-course in Grit 101.

Let's quickly go back thru each of those points.

1. What's your goal? Where are you at today? What's your plan to rock it? (Seriously. What is it?)
2. With whom will you share it?
3. What distractions do you need to ELIMINATE? (This is a big one.)
4. Keep a journal with your successes and failures. (Got a journal yet?!)
5. Be flexible but stay committed.
6. Don't give up. Period.

And...

SPARTAN UP! :)

## RUN, JUMP, CLIMB AND THROW SPEARS

"All of the sitting of modern life is an outright denial of true nature. We are animals, after all. We are evolved to run and jump and climb, throw spears, fight, and dance. Our bodies were built to move — that's why we have brains in the first place — yet somehow we ended up sitting for hours on end. Exercise is the best defense you have against anxiety, stress, depression, and a whole host of other diseases. It helps cells repair themselves, and it quite literally heals the effects of stress through the release of something called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF. Researchers have found, not surprisingly, that when students exercise regularly, their stress levels drop. Upset? Stressed? Mad? Run. Still feel that way? Run faster. You've got nothing to lose but weight and stress. Regular exercise is just as effective as drugs for controlling panic disorders. No wonder employees who exercise call in sick fewer days than employees who don't."

Exercise.

It's the secret sauce to a Spartan life.

De Sena references [John Raitey](#) (the Harvard MD authority on the science of exercise) a number of times throughout the book. Check out the Notes on his great book, [Spark](#).

The science is UNEQUIVOCAL.

Exercise is as effective as medication in reducing depression, anxiety, panic disorders and all the other ick sauce we don't want in our lives.

As Raitey says: "I tell people that going for a run is like taking a little bit of Prozac and a little bit of Ritalin because, like the drugs, exercise elevates these neurotransmitters. It's a handy metaphor to get the point across, but the deeper explanation is that exercise balances neurotransmitters — along with the rest of the neurochemicals in the brain. And as you'll see, keeping your brain in balance can change your life."

*"The vast majority of chronic disease in America is preventable if we avoid a sedentary lifestyle, stop smoking cigarettes, and start eating better."*

~ Joe De Sena

*"There is no shortcut: if you exercise often and eat healthfully, lasting long-term results will follow"*

~ Joe De Sena

How's your exercise?

What can you do to dial it up a notch (or three? ... or ten?)?

Now a good time to make that a priority?

## MEET MR. BURPEE

"The list of fitness attributes above is a tall order, but I've found one exercise that puts it all together: the burpee, aka the squat thrust. Beginning from a standing position, drop into a squat until your hands are actually touching the ground. Without hesitation, kick your legs back to assume the up position of the pushup; do a pushup; and again without hesitation, draw your legs back into lower squat position before standing back up to starting position. From there, drop into another rep."

The burpee.

As De Sena explains on Spartan.com, the humble burpee was named in the 1930s for American physiologist Royal H. Burpee. It's "a sort of a high intensity jumping jack and push-up."

That kicks your butt.

Go ahead and try 10 now. I'll wait. Actually, I'll go do 10 myself.

....

And... That's awesome.

You do it?

If not, go give it a try.

Seriously. They're fantastic.

Here's to the mighty burpee!

P.S. De Sena tells us: "If you never want to get sick again in your life, do thirty burpees a day."

<— Sign me up!

P.P.S. De Sena's four-year-old daughter has already done sets of 300 burpees. \*rubs eyes\*  
Laughing. So great.

## THE BEST WAY TO FINISH IS TO START

"The road to success is dotted with many tempting parking places, but nothing tops the feeling of continuing down that road when you feel like giving up. Every step you take is that much closer to your goal. As Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do." Imagine where you could be if you had already started. So start now. The best way to finish is to start. You can either go to bed satisfied with your efforts today or stressed with what you left for tomorrow. You can either work hard to take on the hill or never know what it is that people see at the top."

Love that.

Aristotle also tells us: "*The beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole.*"

So, what have you been putting off?

Remember: The best way to finish is to start.

## GET TO THE NEXT TELEPHONE POLE

"The way to get through anything mentally painful is to take it a little at a time. The mind can't handle dealing with a massive iceberg of pain in front of it, but it can deal with short nuggets

"Whether you think you can  
or think you can't, you are  
right."

~ Henry Ford

that will come to an end. So instead of thinking, Ugh, I've got twenty-four miles to go, focus on making it to the next telephone pole in the distance. Whether you're running twenty or one hundred and twenty miles at a time, the distance has to be tackled mentally and physically one mile at a time. The ability to compartmentalize pain into these small bite sizes is key."

That. Is. Genius.

What iceberg of pain do you have in your life?

How can you break it down into short little nuggets?!

Nice. Now, let's hit it.

## REALIZING YOUR GREATEST POTENTIAL

"When you "Spartan Up!" it doesn't mean you are doing the most extreme endurance events. It's not about being a gym nut or being tougher than all your coworkers. It's about maximizing your life, realizing your greatest potential, and, in the end, living a memorable life. Spartan Up! is a change in attitude, which involves taking control of your life and your health."

Well, I hope you enjoyed this quick look at a great book.

If you're feelin' it, I think you'll \*really\* enjoy the book.

And, maybe we'll get to knuckle-bump at the starting line of a Spartan Race someday. Or even better, a joyful embrace at the finish.

Here's to realizing our greatest potential as we Spartan Up! :)

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

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

[Spark](#)

[Emotional Intelligence](#)

[The Talent Code](#)

[Mindset](#)

## About the Author of "Spartan Up"

JOE DE SENA



Joe De Sena is owner of the Spartan Race, as well as a legend in endurance and adventure racing circles—he completed the 135-mile Badwater Ultra-marathon, raced the 140.6 miles of Lake Placid Ironman, and finished a 100-mile trail run in Vermont, all within one week. Learn more and sign up for a race at [Spartan.com](#).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



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](#).