

THE BIG IDEAS

Win or Learn

<- New tattoo for our consciousness.

Welfare to \$100 million

Zig and zags.

The Goldfish-Bowl Effect

Time for a bigger bowl?

Standing Up

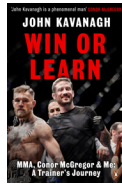
And falling down.

Love

The secret sauce.

There's No Easy Route

To any destination worth getting to.



Win or Learn

MMA, Conor McGregor & Me: A Trainer's Journey

BY JOHN KAVANAGH · PENGUIN UK © 2016 · 240 PAGES

“The aftermath was challenging, but in tough times you must persevere. It was a difficult period, but I never once considered throwing in the towel. Soon we were all back in the gym preparing for the next batch of fights. If there’s a perception that the growth of MMA in Ireland followed a constant upward curve, I can assure you that certainly wasn’t the case. There were almost as many downs as ups, particularly early on, and that was one of several setbacks. However, if you’re on the road to success, you cannot reach that destination without encountering some failures along the way. The people who matter, they don’t care whether you’ve won or lost. You lose on a Saturday night and start fresh on Sunday morning. That’s why I’ve never gotten carried away with celebrating when we win, just like I don’t get too down in the dumps after defeats. Winning and losing are two sides of the same coin. Win or learn is the SBG [Straight Blast Gym] mantra, not win or lose.”

~ John Kavanagh from *Win or Learn*

For those of you who are not into mixed martial arts (or MMA), John Kavanagh is one of the best MMA coaches in the world. He runs Straight Blast Gym Ireland and has been coaching the superstar Conor McGregor—one of the best MMA fighters in history—since the day he got into MMA and arrived in his gym.

John was also Ireland’s first MMA fighter and its first Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt. Plus, he’s a down-to-earth, humble guy. This is his inspiring story about his journey to the top and it reads like a case study in the growth mindset and grit.

I mean... The moment I saw the title I wanted to read it and create a Note on it just so we could talk about the title itself! :)

“Win or Learn”? <- That’s literally THE PERFECT mantra for the growth mindset. (Seriously.)

Win. Or learn. There’s no such thing as “losing” when your ultimate goal is growth. (More on that in the first Idea.)

I’ve always loved sports books (check out our [entire collection of Notes](#)) as sports provide such a great, focused context for excellence in action. I got into MMA a bit more after another one of the leading MMA coaches (Firas Zahabi) became an Optimizer and sent us a nice note letting us know how much he loves PhilosophersNotes. (Thanks, Firas!)

Firas coaches another all-time great fighter: Georges St-Pierre. Check out our Notes on his book [The Way of the Fight](#). We also have Notes on Ronda Rousey’s book [My Fight Your Fight](#).

And, as I read this book, I was reminded of another recent Note on a book by one of the world’s best CrossFit coaches: Ben Bergeron—his [Chasing Excellence](#) is awesome. Plus we recently covered the great mental toughness coach Bob Rotella’s book [How Champion’s Think](#).

The book is packed with inspiring stories and Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites we can apply to our lives TODAY so let’s jump straight in!

“As long as you’ve worked as hard as you can, you should be at peace with the result, whether it goes in your favor or not. Luck also plays a bigger part than we’d all care to admit, so don’t be too hard on yourself when you lose and don’t go overboard with patting yourself on the back when you win. That’s been my approach from the start and it will continue to be until the end.”

~ John Kavanagh

WIN OR LEARN

"After the fight, Conor went out of his way to thank me publicly: 'John has changed our lives. He's been an inspiration to us all. He is a master of human movement. He's a genius at this game.' It was kind of funny that he said I was changing my fighters' lives, because the way I saw it was that they were changing mine. I guess that's when you know you're doing things right as a team."

~ John Kavanagh

"Perhaps it's fitting that this tale of success against the odds has ended with a setback. At Straight Blast Gym, sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, but every time we learn. That attitude was with us when we were a tiny outfit that nobody in the UFC had ever heard of. We persevered and have travelled all the way to the top. Now that we've arrived, we're staying loyal to the same mantra that got us here. It's now more important than ever, because one loss isn't going to send us back to the drawing board. There are challenges ahead that will test our capacity to absorb the lessons that are dealt by sport at the highest level. I know that some of those challenges will result in victory and others will end in defeat. But I'm enthusiastic about them all. Regardless of the outcome of any contest, the real winners are those who learn the most."

Those are actually the *last* words of the book but they perfectly capture what needs to be the *first* Idea of this Note.

First, some context. John wrote this book in 2016. He went from being the very first MMA fighter in Ireland struggling to pay the bills while trying to get a gym off the ground to being the coach of the best fighter on the planet. (It's a truly epic hero's journey.)

But, the last story of the book was about Conor McGregor's defeat by Nate Diaz. He said that they'd learn from it. And, they certainly did as Conor came back to beat Nate in their rematch.

Now, let's have some fun with the title of the book.

Win or Learn.

As I said in the introduction, if there's a perfect mantra for the growth mindset THAT is it.

-> **Win or Learn. Win or Learn. Win or Learn.**

And, if there's any concept we want to grasp more than any other (for ourselves, our kids, our colleagues, our students, etc.), you could make a VERY strong case it's this: REALLY getting the distinction between having a *growth* mindset vs. a *fixed* mindset.

Let's revisit Stanford Professor Carol Dweck's wisdom on the subject. (If you haven't read the Notes on [Mindset](#) + [Self-theories](#) at least three times, please do. :)

But before that, how about a pop quiz?! We've talked about it quite a bit, so... If you feel so inspired, take a moment, and explain it to yourself like you're five. :)

Growth Mindset = _____

Fixed Mindset = _____

Fantastic. Here's my take:

When we have a fixed mindset, we think our abilities are "fixed." They're kinda set in stone. Whatever you've got is pretty much what you've got.

With this mindset, you stick to the stuff you think you're good at and avoid most challenges because you *hate* "losing." Unfortunately, with this mindset, you also miss out on any and all opportunities to get better. Enter: Unfulfilled potential = Eek.

When we have a GROWTH mindset, on the other hand, we KNOW that our abilities are just a starting point. Yah, sure. We all have different starting points which will influence our potential. We're honest about that. But, when we have a *growth* mindset, we KNOW that we can get better if we put in a lot of hard work. We're curious to see just how good we can get and, as a result, we get *excited* about challenges because they give us an opportunity to get better.

With that mindset? We have an opportunity to lean into our latent potential and deliberately seek out challenges. And, as a result, get better and *better* and BETTER! Oh, and guess what! When we inevitably don't "win," we don't "lose." We learn.

Enter: **Win or Learn.** <- That's worth tattooing on our consciousness, my friend.

Practically speaking: Did you "lose" in anything lately? If so, congrats on pushing yourself!! Now... What did you learn? Seriously. *What did you learn?* And... What "Needs work"? And... What will you do differently next time? One more time: **Win or Learn.**

FROM WELFARE TO \$100 MILLION

"The situation reminded me of something former world boxing champion Steve Collins once said to some of my guys when he visited the gym: 'I'd rather be 75 per cent physically ready and 100 per cent mentally ready than 100 per cent physically ready and 75 per cent mentally ready.'"

~ John Kavanagh

"We were actually cutting it tight if we wanted to make the flight—Conor was running behind schedule, as usual—so we quickly hopped into Dee's Peugeot and she eventually managed to get it started. As we were pulling away from the house, Conor asked Dee to stop at the post office in Lucan.

'I need to go in and get my dole,' he said. Conor was getting £188 per week in unemployment benefit.

'Conor, I can loan you the money,' I said. 'We haven't got time.'

But Conor insisted on stopping. For weeks leading up to the fight, he had been all over Irish TV, radio, websites and newspapers, as they reported on the much-hyped Dubliner who was aiming to become the first Irishman to win in the UFC. Yet here he was, queuing up in his local post office en route to his UFC debut, waiting to collect the £188 that he couldn't afford to be without. While I was panicking in the car, certain that we were going to miss the flight, other people in the queue were asking Conor for photographs and autographs. Thankfully, we just made it to the airport on time."

Conor McGregor is now a world-wide superstar. He has over 25 million followers on Instagram. He made \$100 million fighting the world's greatest boxer. Yada yada yada.

But... Five years before he cashed that \$100 million check, he was in a welfare line to collect the £188 he couldn't live without. That's *astounding*. (Obviously.)

And, btw: Not too long before the story above, after his first professional loss as a fighter, Conor was so depressed that he couldn't get out of bed. His mom called John and begged him to come by to help her son. As Conor says in the foreword, "*What would have become of my life if John Kavanagh hadn't come into it? Of course, it's impossible to answer that question now. All I know is that I'm grateful that I don't have to consider it.*"

The book is packed with stories about all the times John (and his athletes) were just barely scraping by in pursuit of their dreams. It's REALLY easy to look at people we admire and think their growth was simply "up and to the right." One big awesome upward arc into stardom.

BUT THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS. EVER. PERIOD. As [Daniel Amen](#) says about our growth, it's always zig-zaggy. George Leonard says the same thing. The path of the master is two steps forward, one back. Sometimes vice-versa.

Why is that important for us to reflect on? Because if you think something is wrong with you (or your kids or...) when you hit a setback then a) you have a fixed mindset (lol) and b) you'll NEVER have a shot at actualizing your potential.

For now: Let's go back to our young hero collecting his £188 welfare check on the way to the biggest fight of his life. Get this: He made \$8,000 for showing up. Another \$8,000 for winning the fight. And (goosebumps) another \$60,000 for having the "Knockout of the Night." So he came home with a \$76,000 check—the first meaningful check of his MMA career to that date. Enough to get a car that didn't require a push start.

" At SBG, our training doesn't really change, regardless of whether the athlete is preparing for a fight or not. We don't tend to do training camps in the same way other teams do. In many gyms, fighters might take a few weeks off after a bout, during which they'll abandon their diet and do absolutely no training. Then they'll head back into a training camp for their next fight, starting from scratch, going from one extreme to the other. We prefer to keep ticking over at a similar, steady pace throughout the year."

~ John Kavanagh

" Bullies are like predatory animals. They can sense when somebody is, or is not, going to be an easy target. We aim to make sure that our kids stand tall and exude confidence."

~ John Kavanagh

THE GOLDFISH-BOWL EFFECT

"It's a great place, John," he said. "But you can't afford it and you'll never fill it. It's massive. Just forget about it and keep an eye out for somewhere else. You'd be crazy to take the risk."

But I refused to be diverted. I had become a little bit obsessed with moving the gym to this unit. It sounds cheesy but I had a vision for how the gym would look in there and I couldn't shake it off. It was exactly how I always pictured my ideal gym. Even though the interest in SBG was growing, I still only had just over a hundred members. But that fact wasn't enough to deter me. All logic seemed to suggest otherwise, but I really believed the move could be successful. I was convinced there would be a goldfish-bowl effect—that we'd fill whatever space we were in. As soon as I returned from Boston after Conor's win against Max Holloway, I began the paperwork for SBG Ireland's next move."

The "goldfish-bowl effect." <- I love that. Reminds me of some Alan Cohen wisdom.

In *Why Your Life Sucks*, he tells us: "We have all been hypnotized into thinking that we are smaller than we are. Just as an undersized flowerpot keeps a mighty tree root-bound or a little fishbowl keeps goldfish tiny, we have adapted, adjusted, and accommodated to a Lilliputian life. But place the same tree in an open field or the fish in a lake, and they will grow to hundreds of times their size. Unlike the tree or goldfish, you are not dependent on someone else to move you. You have the power to move yourself. You can step into a broader domain and grow to your full potential."

Spotlight on you: Are YOU swimming in any goldfish bowls these days?

Are any bigger bowls beckoning you?

I wonder if you could grow to hundreds of times your size?

P.S. John's first "gym" was a tiny little cold, damp room his guys called "The Shed." He upgraded that to another location that was so bad it had a tree growing INSIDE the building. (And, not on purpose.) He was constantly under financial pressure and the landlords were forcing him out.

Then he found this dream facility. 10,000 square feet of pure awesome. It would cost him SEVEN times more than he was spending at the time. His dad told him he was crazy. But he couldn't shake the vision of his ideal gym.

He made the leap. And his membership blew up 7 times. Goldfish-bowl effect.

P.P.S. The whole dad telling his son he was crazy reminded me of Georges St-Pierre and his dad. In *The Way of the Fight* he tells us: "The first time I told my dad I wanted to be world champion in mixed martial arts, he thought I was nuts. It was my dream, sure, but everything begins with a dream, and it felt real inside my head. It was hard to talk about, and harder for others to understand or visualize. But I've always had premonitions, feelings and visions that felt like they belonged to me and me alone. Like the future sometimes takes place inside my head."

GSP could see himself as a champion WAY before it made any rational sense to see that. Conor McGregor was, of course, the same way. John tells us that the FIRST day he met Conor (when he was still a teenager), Conor told him that one day he would be a world champion.

That's crazy.

And that's precisely how Champions think.

In fact, Bob Rotella tells us PRECISELY that in his book *How Champions Think*. After telling us about LeBron James' commitment to being the best basketball player ever (!!!), he shared this wisdom from the greatest golfer ever: "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.'"

" We took a gamble and this time it didn't pay off. That won't change how we go about our business. We will, however, continue striving to make sure that we're as well prepared as we can possibly be. That's what gives us the confidence to face any challenge. We'll take that risk again if we need to."

~ John Kavanagh

STANDING UP AND FALLING DOWN.

"When I entered the octagon in the aftermath of the fight, I was relieved that he seemed okay physically, but the emotional pain he was enduring was written all over his face. I hugged him and delivered a message.

"Who else is doing what you're doing? Who else would move up two weight classes and fight a top guy on less than two weeks' notice? You could have backed out of this when dos Anjos pulled out and nobody would have said a negative word, but unlike what everybody else would have done, you didn't even give it a thought. You hold your head up high and speak positively when you're on that microphone. Be proud of what you're doing because I know I am. Remember what Fedor Emelianenko said, 'Only those who never stand up, never fall down.'"

Context: Conor McGregor beat Jose Aldo to win the Featherweight Championship (at 145 lbs). (btw: He did that in 13 seconds which is the shortest championship fight in UFC history.)

Then he was scheduled to go for the Lightweight Championship (at 155 lbs) and attempt to become the first UFC fighter to simultaneously hold both titles. His opponent got injured days before their match. A new opponent was picked—Nate Diaz—who (understandably) wasn't willing to come down to 155 lbs on such short notice. So Conor moved up to 170 lbs to fight him (which is two weight classes and crazy when you think about it).

Then Conor got beaten. Tapped out in front of millions of people. Gah. Imagine THAT pain.

Then listen to the words of his coach and remember the words of the ultimate hero's journey coach, [Joseph Campbell](#), who told us that life is always calling us to adventure. We can choose to answer that call or ignore it. When we answer it, there's always the chance of bliss. AND... He says, there's also ALWAYS the chance for "fiasco."

Those "fascos" when things *don't* work out the way we hoped, REALLY hurt. The Hero gets that. But... When the fiasco strikes, what do they do?

They Learn.

(What do YOU do?)

LOVE: THE SECRET SAUCE TO WINNING (AND LEARNING!)

"This has been a rollercoaster ride. There were as many low points as there were highlights along the way. At times it might have made more sense to get off and try something else, but I'm certainly glad I never did. My long-term involvement in this sport didn't hinge on UFC success. To be completely honest, that has been nothing other than a bonus, albeit a pretty huge one. All I've ever wanted was to do enough to ensure that MMA paid the bills. As long as that was the case, I was in this for life. ..."

I've been Ireland's first MMA fighter, first Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt and first coach of a UFC champion. Sure, they're significant achievements to reflect on, but that's not what I'll take the most satisfaction from when I call it a day. The overriding theme when I look back will be that I spent my life doing something I love. There's no greater satisfaction than that."

You know how I said this book is a case study in the growth mindset?

Well, think about John's love for what he does (and the success that followed as a by-product of that love) while we think about this wisdom from Carol Dweck: *"The growth-minded athletes, CEOs, musicians, or scientists all loved what they did, whereas many of the fixed-minded ones did not.*

Many growth-minded people didn't even plan to go to the top. They got there as a result of doing what they love. It's ironic: The top is where the fixed-mindset people hunger to be, but it's

where many growth-minded people arrive as a by-product of their enthusiasm for what they do. This point is also crucial. In the fixed-mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or if you're not the best—it's all been wasted. The growth mindset allows people to value what they're doing regardless of the outcome."

Do YOU love what you do?

"If you want something badly enough, never let anyone tell you that you're not capable of attaining it. You'll eventually reap the benefits of possessing that kind of attitude."

~ John Kavanagh

THERE'S NO EASY ROUTE TO ANY PLACE WORTH GETTING TO

"After the new champion had been officially crowned and we made our way backstage, I found a quiet room and lay down on the floor. Orlagh can be sneaky with her phone and captured the moment I lay on the floor. At a time like that, it's difficult to stop yourself from reflecting on the journey. I thought about being beaten up in Rathmines; about painting that tiny shed in Phibsboro on a scorching hot day; about Dave Roche and all the training partners from the days when we barely even knew what we were doing; about never having a penny to my name because I spent everything I earned on furthering my martial arts education; about the tough nights of working on the doors; about how I was in tears when the gym in Tallaght fell through; about being kicked out of the place in Rathcoole; about all the losses and the setbacks. For the vast majority of the journey the most convenient move would have been to throw in the towel. But there's no easy route to any place that's worth getting to."

In addition to being a case study in the growth mindset (and [Grit](#)), this book (along with all great biographies of people who have done great things) is a case study in our commitment to Optimizing to become Modern Heroes.

I love this line: "There's no easy route to any place that's worth getting to."

It begs a few questions: Where are you headed? What destination is worthy of you?

Get clear on that and then KNOW that it's not going to be easy.

Then remember: We don't ever lose on our hero's journey.

We win. Or we learn.

B

Brian Johnson,
Professional Optimizer

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

[The Way of the Fight](#)

[My Fight Your Fight](#)

[Chasing Excellence](#)

[How Champions Think](#)

[Why Your Life Sucks](#)

About the Author of "Win or Learn"

JOHN KAVANAGH



John Kavanagh, who runs Straight Blast Gym Ireland, is one of the world's leading mixed martial arts coaches. His stable of fighters includes the UFC featherweight champion, Conor McGregor.

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.