

# HOLY SWEAT

HOW DO I GROW?

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## ***PREFACE***

This is the third book in the Ultimate Training Series—a series aimed at unpacking the five principles taught predominantly at Athletes in Action®’s Ultimate Training Camp®. These five principles are part of a unique curriculum developed by Athletes in Action staff over the last 45 years. They will give you a biblical framework to help you see sport as an opportunity to worship God so that you can participate in sport in a way that honors him.

“The Principles” are the gospel applied to sport, experienced through sport, and spoken in the language of sport.

Each principle takes a different story from the Bible and applies the principle from that story to sport and competition. They cover topics like worship, idolatry, motivation, identity, growth, pain, and perspective.

The beauty of these principles is that they come directly from God’s Word and apply to life beyond sport, as well. Don’t limit them to your athletic career. Apply them to your studies, business career, relationships, finances—every area of life.

# INTRODUCTION

*Greatness vs. Growth*

In 2008, Nike launched a campaign under its Jordan Brand consisting of two provocative words in all caps: BECOME LEGENDARY. In their press release announcing the initiative, Nike explained that the campaign was,

“intended to inspire consumers to exceed expectations, challenge conventional views of sportsmanship and explain that greatness is attainable. Using evocative imagery, the ad campaign animates the Jordan Brand core truths—Authentic, Uncompromised, Earned, and Aspirational—which speak directly to the brand pillars derived by Michael Jordan’s personal values and philosophy for success.”

A commercial from this campaign features Michael Jordan talking in front of a group of basketball players at his camp. His monologue becomes the narration for the video. As basketball footage plays in the background, Jordan tells the group:

*Maybe it’s my own fault.  
Maybe I led you to believe it was easy, when it wasn’t.  
Maybe I made you think my highlights started at the free throw line—  
and not in the gym.  
Maybe I made you think that every shot I took was a game winner—  
that my game was built on flash and not fire.  
Maybe it’s my fault that you didn’t see that failure gave me strength—  
that my pain was my motivation.  
Maybe I led you to believe that basketball was a God-given gift and not  
something I worked for every single day of my life.  
Maybe I destroyed the game.  
Or maybe you’re just making excuses.*

The commercial ends with the Jordan Jumpman logo and the words “BECOME LEGENDARY.”

Nike’s—and Jordan’s—point is clear. He didn’t accidentally fall into greatness. It took years of discipline, hard work, and dedication to his craft. The campaign’s values to “inspire consumers to exceed expectations” and communicate the Jordan Brand’s core truths of “uncompromised” and “earned” are easy to recognize throughout the sixty-second clip.

Athletes resonate with the narration. You understand improving in your sport is a daily grind. It’s waking up early for that first workout. It’s taking in proper nutrition to get the most out of what you just did. It’s stretching and strength training. It’s a late-morning nap so you’re rested for the afternoon workout—assuming you don’t miss class to do it. It’s more stretching, practice, and hydrating. It’s eating anything put in front of you to reload. Then crashing underneath the exhaustion of the day, only to wake up and do it all again.

This crescendos with the opportunity to put your training to the test during actual competition.

And repeat—again and again and again.

All of this ignores the drama involving other teammates, relational dynamics with your coach, whether or not to reveal the full extent of your nagging injury to your trainer, and the endless chatter on social media that slowly chips away at your true identity.

Yes, being an athlete takes work. A lot of it.

The purpose of this book is not to tell you something you don’t already know from experience. As an athlete, you signed up for the grind.

This is about helping you understand that your relationship with God also involves work and discipline. Why is that important? Two reasons.

First, becoming like Jesus doesn’t happen by accident. It takes discipline and hard work (but, as we’ll see, this hard work and discipline look a little different than how athletes typically understand them).

The goal for athletes seeking to honor the Lord with their sport—and their life—is not happiness, but holiness. Jesus has called you to be like him (John 13:13-17). To think like him (Philippians 2:5-8), love like

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# 1

## **PHYSICAL TRAINING VS. SPIRITUAL TRAINING**

him (John 15:12), and act like him (1 John 2:6) all the time. If you want to become like him, you need to live like him. There are no shortcuts to greatness in sport, and there are no shortcuts to godliness in life.

Secondly, it's important so you are prepared to "win" in life. When situations inevitably arise in your life that demand an immediate response, you can be ready to respond in a way that honors God and brings him glory instead of yourself.

You don't need Nike's BECOME LEGENDARY campaign and an inspirational narration from Michael Jordan to show you the blueprint for growth as an athlete. We all know, at least at some level, that talent will only get you so far. If you want to be great—or simply improve—you need to put in the time and effort.

The same is true for the Christian life. If you desire to grow in your faith, training is required. In God's economy, becoming legendary always takes a back seat to becoming godly.

This book is a beginner's guide on how to work out spiritually (sweat) for God's glory, your joy, and the good of those you interact with on a daily basis.

Both physical training and spiritual training are necessary for an athlete claiming to follow Christ. A passage in the New Testament speaks to how you should prioritize both in your life.

First Timothy 4:7-8 says, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Train yourself for godliness.

Bodily training is of some value.

Godliness is of value in every way.

In this chapter we'll address three reasons why athletes should prioritize their spiritual training above their physical training. The *why* matters just as much as the what and the how.

Most athletes understandably struggle as they seek to integrate their faith and sport together. We invert the prescription found in 1 Timothy 4:7-8. We live out the lie that spiritual training only has some value, while physical training has value in every way, as it holds promise for this life and also for the life to come. It's time to reject this lie and align ourselves with the truth.

Before we examine the first reason, let's look briefly at what prioritization does and doesn't mean. You might spend eight to ten hours a day on sports-related activities. Does this mean you need to spend at least eleven hours doing spiritual training to tip the scales? No. We wouldn't tell parents who are trying to prioritize their kids to stop working eight hours a day and pull their kids out of school. Prioritization is not about equal time or more time. It's about leveraging your discretionary time

(however much or little) toward what you value most and finding ways to integrate that highest value into all other areas of your life.

What does this mean for athletes seeking to prioritize their spiritual training while maintaining the rigorous schedule of physical training their sport demands? It means making the appropriate sacrifices of the time you do have and committing that to growing in your faith. It means waking up a little earlier to spend time with God. It means inviting God to be a part of your athletic activities instead of limiting his involvement in your life to a Sunday morning church service. It means stewarding the free time you do have in a way that kindles spiritual growth (instead of allowing a screen to demand your attention).

Athletes should prioritize their spiritual training above their physical training because:

1. God tells us to prioritize it.
2. God promises to lead the process of our spiritual growth.
3. Spiritual growth has massive positive ripple effects in our athletic contexts.

### **GOD TELLS US TO PRIORITIZE OUR SPIRITUAL TRAINING**

We already saw God (through Paul's words to Timothy) direct his people to train for godliness in 1 Timothy 4:7. But this is not an isolated command. All throughout the Bible we see God imploring his people to have a mindset and heart posture dedicated to growing into his likeness by aligning themselves with his Word (*italics mine*):

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6)

[S]o that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking

the truth in love, we are to *grow up in every way* into him who is the head, into Christ. (Ephesians 4:14-15)

If your coach tells you to do something, you do it. They have a position of authority over you (whether you like it or not!), and the coaching they give is intended to make you a better athlete and help the team win. This should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: God is not your coach. He is the Creator, Sustainer, and Master over the entire universe. If you agree to abide by your coach's directives, how much more should you follow God's? His instructions are given to help you grow into his likeness and to help in the expansion of his kingdom. You would do well to follow them.

### **GOD PROMISES TO LEAD THE PROCESS**

God doesn't just tell us to prioritize our spiritual training; he does something extra to "sweeten the pot." He says that our growth is ultimately dependent on him leading the process, and he promises to see that process through (*italics mine*):

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this *comes from the Lord* who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

[F]or it is *God who works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only *God who gives the growth*. (1 Corinthians 3:7)

And I am sure of this, that *he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion* at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

This is both freeing and frustrating. God tells us to pursue righteousness and align our lives in a way that honors him, but ultimately, any growth we experience is not of our own doing—it's from him. Athlete, God always

wants the glory. The beauty in all of this is that God promises that spiritual growth will happen because he is in charge of making it happen.

If you play college sports (or hope to someday), you probably chose your school because you trusted that the coach would help you maximize your potential. How much more so with God? Why wouldn't you want to prioritize spiritual training when you are promised by God that he will quarterback the process of your growth on your behalf?

### IT ACTUALLY HELPS YOU AS AN ATHLETE

First Timothy 4:8 tells us that training in godliness is better than physical training for two reasons:

1. It's beneficial for this life.
2. It's beneficial for the life to come.

It can be easy to focus on the second reason. Of course training in godliness will help us for an eternal relationship with God after this life is over. But how is it beneficial for life now, especially within your context as an athlete?

For starters, let's make sure we are not equating the words "helpful" or "beneficial" with success.

In the same way that drinking plenty of water best positions your body to stay healthy and fight off sickness, prioritizing spiritual training best positions you to face whatever the world of sport throws your way by giving you a constant, biblical perspective.

### **PROPER PERSPECTIVE IS NOT ABOUT MINIMIZING SPORT AND LESSENING YOUR COMPETITIVE DRIVE BUT SEEING IT AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF ETERNITY IN A WAY THAT FREES YOU TO PLAY WITHOUT THE FEAR OF FAILURE.**

Maintaining this perspective puts you in the best position to optimize your God-given skill set. It also allows you to see your sport against the backdrop of the bigger things going on in the world around you. And what's bigger than eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:11)? Proper perspective is not about minimizing sport and lessening your competitive drive but seeing it against the backdrop of eternity in a way that frees you to play without

the fear of failure. Why? Because biblical perspective can free athletes from attaching too much weight to the outcome of a game.

Relational perspective matters, too. An athlete committed to training in godliness has a growing understanding that they are a son or daughter of God. They understand that God is their Father. This does not mean Christian athletes have an advantage because they have "God on their side." It simply means they already have access to everything—through God—that sport promises, but fails to fully deliver: lasting joy, peace, contentment, identity, purpose, and power.

A Christian perspective looks something like this:

*"This life is not the end. I will spend eternity with God in a renewed body on the new earth. Endless joy, for all of eternity, with the God of the Universe awaits me. This is a relational God who has adopted me into his family as his child. Because of this, I will play fast and free. What can sport offer me that God has not already freely given? I may make a mistake, but against the backdrop of eternity, that's ok. While I will listen to the advice of my coaches and teammates, I refuse to be weighed down by the weight of their approval, because this game will not affect my eternal destination. And that carries more weight to me than the outcome of an earthly competition."*

This doesn't guarantee success in the sports arena. But hopefully the possibility of competing with this kind of mindset, and the potential competitive advantage of playing with freedom instead of fear, excites you. (For more about this read the first book in this series, *Audience of One*.)

### THE WHY BENEATH THE WHY

In the previous book in this series, *Inside Game*, we learned that the driving force behind our actions is significant to God. Our spiritual sweat must come *from* love, not *for* love. It must come from an identity that we have received *from* God, not one that we are trying to achieve through impressing others with our athletic performances.

You could close this book right now, neglect putting into practice the spiritual disciplines that will help you grow in your faith, and God's

love for you will still be exactly the same. Isn't that crazy? God's love for you is based on the fact that his Son, Jesus, lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins, and rose from the dead after three days, declaring victory over sin and death. If you have confessed your sins to God and trusted that Jesus' finished work on the cross has restored your relationship with him, you can be confident that you don't need to perform to earn favor with God.

Athlete, God isn't more in love with the future version of you than he is with the present version of you. You may assume that the future version of yourself will be so much better than the current version. "Future you" will read your Bible more, pray fervently, talk to teammates about

Jesus with newfound boldness, and tithe ten percent of whatever income you have to the church.

All of that may prove true. But even if it doesn't, know this: your actions, good or bad, won't come close to moving the needle of God's

love for you in either direction. His love for you is already at the max, and his love for you is constant.

So take a deep breath. Free yourself from the weight of feeling like you need to even read this book and practice everything in it in order to somehow earn from God what he has already freely given to you in Christ.

***GOD ISN'T MORE IN LOVE WITH THE FUTURE VERSION OF YOU THAN HE IS WITH THE PRESENT VERSION OF YOU.***

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

**Which of the three reasons to prioritize spiritual training is the most motivating for you?**

**How does it make you feel to know that God is invested in your spiritual growth and will help lead the process?**

**Do you agree with this statement: Maintaining a biblical perspective puts you in the best position to optimize your God-given skill set? Why or why not?**



**How would you explain this in more detail to a teammate: Our spiritual sweat must come from love, not for love?**

**Why do you think it's especially hard for athletes to understand that God is not more pleased with the "future version" of themselves?**

## **2**

# **THE WORD VS. THE WORLD**

Athletes have a mountain of resources at their disposal when it comes to improving their talent: coaches, trainers, teammates, rivals, practice, game film, nutrition, stretching, rest—just to name a few. As an athlete, you know what it takes, at least at a foundational level, to move from where you are to where you want to be. But what about as a Christian? Do you know the resources available to you?

God has given you plenty of ways to train in godliness: prayer, fasting, giving, church, relationships with other Christians, serving others—just to name a few. But two deserve special attention. They can create growth in your faith by themselves, but when combined, they work together for God's glory and your good by catalyzing your spiritual growth powerfully. What are these spiritual growth enhancers? God's Word and his Holy Spirit. We'll address God's Word in this chapter and the Holy Spirit in chapter three.

### **WHAT IS THE WORD OF GOD (THE BIBLE)?**

The Bible is a singular text, containing sixty-six different books, written by forty authors over a span of over 1,500 years, on three continents, in three languages. It's not a playbook for life, though there are plenty of commands and principles for us to follow. It's not an ancient, out-of-date historical document, though it is old. It's not a book of inspiration, though plenty of inspiration is found in it.

No, the Bible is a story about God. More specifically, it's the story of how God is reconciling to himself the very human beings who he created but who turned away from him. This story is God's word to us. It's told in a variety of genres, like poetry, historical narrative, personal letter, wisdom literature, and prophecy. It shows us who God is and what he has