

Now What?

*The Ongoing Pursuit of Improved
Performance*

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Foreword
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On Target Publications
Santa Cruz, CA

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Don't Fear the Obvious

I'VE BEEN LUCKY. I have had the opportunity to train, visit and party with excellent coaches, outstanding athletes and training partners. To find the keys to progress and success. I like to talk with people who have walked the walk before me.

Sometimes, the answer is to do the opposite of what everyone else is doing. Years ago, Bill Koch lectured at the Salt Lake City REI, where he discussed “inventing” a form of cross-country skiing that completely changed the sport. He skated past his competitors, and the sport morphed on the spot. He also trained differently from everyone else, using his focus on hard intervals versus junk long-distance training.

I call this a contrarian approach, and I love it. There's an ebook, which you can grab for free from *danjohn.net*, about discus throwing that discusses how I approach coaching the

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event by *not* throwing the discus. Now *that* is the definition of contrarian.

And, I love it. I love it.

But, being contrarian is nearly worthless in most areas of life. Generally, the answer to most of our questions will be fairly straightforward. The answer is boring. The answer is obvious.

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner have a series of books they call *Freakonomics*. These are fascinating books, and some readers find things that make them want to say and do horrible things to the authors. But, like my professor used to tell us in my college econ class, there is not a lot of “nice” in economics.

Three points leaped off the pages as I read *Freakonomics*. It was at that moment that I realized that economics, in addition to geometry, might be the two best fields of study for a coach.

The three points:

- ◆ *Knowing what to measure simplifies life.*
- ◆ *Conventional wisdom is usually wrong.*
- ◆ *Fear of the obvious—Don’t be afraid to do the obvious!*

I would like to apologize to the authors for taking such an excellent book and summing it up so pithily.

Knowing what to measure simplifies life

One of the reasons I enjoy coaching track and field is that there is almost no judging. No one votes on a winner. There is neither a swimsuit contest nor a Q&A after the event to help the judges decide.

It’s distance and it’s time. The victor jumps or throws the farthest. In the races, the winner is the first across the finish line. It’s pretty simple stuff.

When judges are involved, universally we all boo the decision.

Track and field coaches know what to measure. I was at an event and a woman told me she high jumped in high school. I asked about her best. The number was impressive and we talked about how she went to a major regional championship and even considered competing past college.

The husband asked, "How did you know she was good?"

She jumped "this high."

It's pretty simple: Knowing what to measure lets you know what is working or not working—good or bad, excellent or poor. I knew she was very good because her mark was very good.

Strength coaches should stick to load. Certainly, mastery of movements and solid techniques are important, but load is how we measure things.

With the human body being such an amazing, adaptable thing, measuring weight on the scale is rarely a good idea. You learn nothing about lean body mass from stepping on the scale.

The waistline measurement is a key for the fitness trainer. Almost always, when the waistline measurement goes down, good things are happening with fat loss. Yes, you can buy and use very expensive machines to determine bodyfat percentages, but the waistline measurement usually does the same job far cheaper.

So:

Track coaches measure time and distance.

Strength coaches measure load.

Personal trainers measure waistlines.

You might be reading this and wondering: What should I measure?

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This is where the rest of the discussion will lead us. Sometimes in team sports, what to measure demands some thought. But for longevity, you could simply measure quality years of life.

Find something to measure. Measure it. Apply practice and programming. Measure again.

Then, assess to determine whether or not it's a good measurement!

Conventional wisdom is usually wrong

One of the more annoying habits of modern parents is to come to practice and ask if the kids are doing cardio. Technically, if hearts are beating, the kids are doing cardio.

I have a new answer: "Well, today we are focusing on the lymphatic system."

That shuts everyone up, as most people only have a vague notion of this important system, as opposed to the "unimportant systems" that keep us alive, and we can continue running 400-meter repeats.

Conventional wisdom in strength and conditioning seems to be this:

- ◆ There is a need for an arm day, but few understand the need for a leg day or back day.
- ◆ Mindless aerobic work leads to mastery in sports through sweating.
- ◆ Core work, or lots of ab crunches, improves athletic ability.
- ◆ Warming up and cooling down are crucial to performance.
- ◆ It is an absolute must for the athlete to look the part, both physically and materially, with proper expensive gear.

None of these are true. In fact, none of these are even that important in the big picture, but I sure like how well outfitted the athletes of the current generation are when they show up to practice. They might not be able to run a lap or do a pullup, but, wow, do they look good in their matching apparel.

Fads tend to dominate the fitness world. Jogging, yoga, aerobics, step aerobics, Jazzercise, Nautilus and all the rest of the workouts that shall not be named dominate training, fitness and fat loss until we all come to realize these options simply don't work.

That's a problem: We start doing something that is really hard, makes us sweaty and maybe makes us puke but rarely delivers the benefits promised.

But, these methods *have* to work! The people on the commercial got great results!

And...that is the issue with conventional wisdom: It's based on commercials, popular magazines and hearsay. Conventional wisdom tends to be so right sometimes and so wrong at other times.

The problem with conventional wisdom is that there is no measurement. Next week in the hair salon, there will be a new magazine; the TV doctor will find a new herb, and someone with shinier pants will be selling a new program.

Fear of the obvious

I have based my life on trusting the obvious answers first. My overview of being a track and field coach is:

Throwers throw.

Jumpers jump.

Hurdlers hurdle.

Sprinters sprint.

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If you can prove to me that anything works beyond this, I am all ears. But, until that day, you can coach a teen to the finals of the state meet using these simple truths.

I know. These are obvious.

Lift weights to get stronger. Fast to lose bodyfat. Stretch to get flexible. Read a lot to be well read.

Obvious. I wish I could sell it to you.

Most of us have an odd fear of the obvious. Somehow it isn't sexy enough. It's not flashy enough.

But, it works. The answers to most of life's questions are obvious. And we all seem to hate this. We all seem to fear this. Most of what works in life is so obvious, we refuse to put our arms around it and apply it.

Percy Cerutti

Percy Cerutti is one of my coaching heroes. I was struggling as a throws coach when I went "all in" and signed up, as a camper, to the John Powell Discus Camp at Dennison University in Granville, Ohio. During one of our rare hours off, I walked into the library and went to the sports section, where I found one of Cerutti's books...a rare find in 1993.

His insights changed my career. From his work, I developed *Easy Strength*, while adding more medicine-ball games, more gymnastics and an understanding that the athlete needs to use imagination to become elite.

He emphasized "thinking" before training. Famously, he said:

*"While work does do things, it's intelligent
work that does superior things."*

Intelligent work.

Growing up, there was a phrase used for everything in life: *Look before you leap*. A few minutes of planning trumps years of rehab from lack of planning.

Intelligent work means using your brain before you rely on pain. As I often tell people: You might have one more injury, but do you have one more recovery?

You can run with this as far as you want:

- ♦ You might have one more offseason, but do you have one more season?
- ♦ You might have one more hard workout, but do you have one more recovery?
- ♦ You might have one more “hold my beer and watch this,” but do you have one more chance of escaping the alligator’s jaws?

Hard work does amazing things. Intelligent work does even better things.

Intelligent work...intelligent coaching

Once we embrace the idea that intelligent work trumps...well, whatever is the opposite of intelligent work—we soon understand that intelligent coaching is the best thing coaches can do.

The value of using the brain first means several things:

- ♦ More efficient technique
- ♦ Injury avoidance
- ♦ Faster recovery (injury avoidance...*is this redundant?*)
- ♦ Faster...longer...stronger...better...any other word with “er” at the end
- ♦ Longer “youth”
- ♦ Better performance

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I can always tell when people have been well coached. Their technique seems to save energy. Their approach is simple. The execution seems flawless. There isn't a lot of wasted energy. As we say in sports: Nothing "bleeds out."

Including the athlete!

Learning from the one-percenters

Years ago, I sat in an audience and listened as two rabid speakers assailed each other's positions, character, moral code and parentage. Finally, a third speaker was allowed a moment. He paused and said:

"I represent the radical middle. I reflect what 98% of the population believes about (this topic). We can learn from the one percent on both sides, but the rest of us need to have our voices heard."

Radical middle. The one-percenters.

The concepts changed my political thinking, but more important to this discussion, the concepts changed my coaching.

I tell my young interns—and all my audiences—this simple wish: I wish all of the fitness trainers and coaches would help an underserved community. There are plenty of people who need help. Help them.

A coach I spend time with, Taylor Lewis, works with the two most famous professional baseball players in the sport. If I said their names, you would know them, but I won't. Taylor then hops in his car and heads off to help people with cystic fibrosis. When Taylor talks, you should listen.

Why?

When Taylor says something works, it's because it works with the elite of the elite of sport and also with people struggling

every day to do the basics of life...like breathing. Trust me, if something Taylor does works to improve the best MLB players in history *and* helps people struggling with CF, it's going to work for the rest of us, too.

In addition to elite athletes, I also work with people who have multiple sclerosis. Thomas DeLorme worked with injured WWII vets...and polio victims. Most of the great insights in training come when we test both ends of the spectrum: the underserved and struggling, and the top of the performance pile.

Taylor always calls his clients with CF athletes because they strive, as the original definition of “athlete” reminds us, for the prize. For people with any physical (or mental or...) issues, the prize is quality of life.

My book *Can You Go?* attempted to find a simple way to assess the general population—these are the people I call “everybody else.” These are the 98 percent who need to address one or more of these three issues:

- ♦ Body composition
- ♦ Strength
- ♦ Mobility

The 1-2-3-4 Assessment in *Can You Go?* gives a general idea of where the typical client needs to focus for a few weeks. The client's actual goal is secondary, as the focus is not on what the client *wants*, but on what the client *needs*.

It always sounds harsh, but more often than not, most clients truly don't know the answer to the question, “What's your goal?” Most people spout off vague concepts like “lose weight” that don't even make sense in the big picture of health, fitness and longevity.

Oh, you want to lose weight? Cut off a leg.

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Now, if you want to change lean body mass in a positive direction, we have a different discussion.

Can You Go? was based on a three-word assessment I use for active athletes: *Can You Go?* If not, let's go home...the day, season or career is over. The assessment for performance sports is simple: Here you are! Life as an athlete is a study in the *pure present*.

Like actors and most entertainers, athletes live in the pure present. The active athlete is only as good as the last performance, the last competition or the last mark. The assessment is simple: *The last time under the spotlights is who you are right now*.

Your goal is still your goal. The journey from “here we are right now” to the goal has usually been walked before...perhaps even by you.

Generally, for active athletes I recommend 20% of their training time be spent in the weightroom getting stronger with something simple like *Easy Strength*—see Appendix Eight, page 293. The other 80% of the time should be spent practicing the sport.

But, mindlessly doing the sport will have little impact on performance. Performers need to rehearse *the problems* associated with performance. This could be rain, cold and snow, but it can also be endlessly waiting around, silly last-minute officiating gaffes, or attempts by others to unnerve you.

We can all learn from the performance athlete and the performer on stage or screen. We need to prep for this with checklists, planning and sharing experiences.

But, we also need to practice the appropriate physical tension, mental arousal and proper heart rate.

The tools of arousal control made my parenting skills better, as I learned not to shoot up to the fifth floor when my daughters “push my buttons.” There are moments in life, like walking those daughters down the aisle in their weddings, where being able to

control the heart rate, physical tension and mental arousal are all very good things.

I want to introduce you to how I look at this. I can support anyone's goals through four basic mental sets:

- ♦ Shark habits
- ♦ Pirate maps
- ♦ Peaking, planning and programming
- ♦ Principles

These four points will weave together and interact, depending on the specific issues of the day, week, month or year.

In addition, there are four interacting terms that deserve clarity in the field of fitness and health:

- ♦ Health
- ♦ Longevity
- ♦ Fitness
- ♦ Performance

Health, according to Phil Maffetone, is “the optimal interplay of the human organs.” We determine health with blood tests, annual screenings and medical checkups.

That's it. There are far too many stories of athletes in the prime of their careers dropping dead due to some unseen health issue. We need to measure health.

Longevity is an issue of both quality and quantity. Robb Wolf once summed it up very well: Live long, drop dead. Certainly, we are living longer lives, but are we living better lives? This quickly becomes an ethical question; still, we need to ensure the quality of life, too.

Fitness is simply the ability to do a task. That's it. You don't need six-pack abs to toss a caber; in fact, being too lean might

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make it more difficult. If the task is a marathon and you complete it, you are simply fit for the task of running more than 26 miles. That might, by the way, impact your health and longevity to do a fitness task!

Performance comes the instant your name is called—the spotlight shines on your face and you must perform.

Performance is the key to sports, acting, dancing, music and musical theater. It probably helps politicians, teachers and anyone else who needs to persuade an audience.

To perform is the master quality for success in sports and the arts. Much can be learned from performance, even for those who never want to be on the stage.

There is one other thing to consider: Some of the best things you can do for health, longevity, fitness or performance might have to be done only once...or, at most, a few times. There are other concepts that might be ongoing.

The *Now What?* quadrants

Following those insights, I came up with the *Now What?* Grid.

Now What? Grid	Health/Longevity	Fitness/Performance
Ongoing/Permanent	Pirate Maps	Principles!
Once or a Few Times (Start/Increase/Decrease/Stop)	Shark Habits	Peaking, Planning and Programming

Health and longevity issues take up one column, and fitness and performance the other. There are some areas that overlap and you should welcome that into your thinking.

An important thing to consider

I'm convinced that human brains are hardwired to deal with famine and hard times. We seem to always fear going without—going without food, water, or gifts on Christmas morning. (That's why I am always on the “nice list.”)

When attempting to change behaviors, I see a bit of a continuum from the easiest to the hardest:

Start

Increase

Decrease

Stop

Most of us are experts on starting things. In fact, I'm going to start fasting right now.

There! I did it!

Continuing to fast will be an issue, but, for right now, I am fasting.

Many people start a diet and exercise regimen during the first week of January. Most quit. Many people start the school year with perfect notebooks and great plans for nightly homework and early test preparation. It doesn't always happen.

Starting seems to be pretty easy for us to do. Increasing things is a bit harder. Good nutritionists, like those I first encountered in the early 1980s, had us focus on:

More protein

More vegetables

More water

Asking people to eat more seems like a fairly simple task. Throughout my career, I have mentioned this three-part formula

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to dozens, if not hundreds, of athletes. One would think the responses would be universally “Yes, of course!”

Sorry, no.

If you wish to use this list, prepare for the following:

“Where do you find protein?”

“What exactly are vegetables?”

“Like, water?”

I have a policy *not* to write letters of recommendation for athletes who ask questions like these. I’m not sure you want your surgeon or dentist being this clueless about the basics.

Decreasing is where things get difficult. Most of us know the value of cutting back on carbohydrates, desserts, sweets, cheat meals, booze and a long list of other things. Okay, then: Decrease those things!

I must say, that was easy to type.

Easy to type and hard to do. Most of the issues we have with things to decrease are that they’re mindless habits. I have a few ideas about dealing with those. So as to not keep you in suspense: Empty your cupboards and home of all the junk and never buy any again.

You’re welcome.

Stopping. Stopping is tough.

I used to occasionally visit AA meetings with a guy called Crazy Jerry. I always left smelling of cigarettes and bad coffee, so I once said, nicely:

“It might be an idea to stop smoking, too.”

CJ lit into me like a flamethrower. He questioned my parentage and stated some things about me that were anatomically impossible. The gist of his point was this:

It took him every ounce of energy and free will to stop drinking. There was no room in the tank for anything else.

Stopping is *hard*. Not starting is certainly easier.

If we take these simple points and apply them to someone who weighs more than 300 pounds or just needs to shrink the waistline some, we can approach it like this:

From easiest to hardest

Show up! (*Start*)

More veggies, protein, water. Walk more. (*Increase*)

Fewer cheat meals and less TV (*Decrease*)

Stop...smoking, snacking. These are really tough!

A note on television watching: If I told you there was something in your house that was giving you diabetes, cardiovascular disease and a premature death, would you avoid it?

There is something like that. It's called the television. Avoid it.

“The results showed that more than two hours of TV viewing per day increased the risk of Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and more than three hours of daily viewing increased risk of premature death. For each additional two hours of TV viewing per day, the risk of Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and premature mortality increased by 20, 15, and 13 percent, respectively.”

*~ Television Viewing and Risk of Type 2 Diabetes,
Cardiovascular Disease, and
All-Cause Mortality: A Meta-Analysis,
Anders Grøntved, Frank B. Hu,
Journal of the American Medical
Association, June 15, 2011*

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Now What? Grid	Health/Longevity	Fitness/Performance
Ongoing/Permanent	Pirate Maps	Principles!
Once or a Few Times (Start/Increase/Decrease/Stop)	Shark Habits	Peaking, Planning and Programming

As you begin any march toward a goal, take a moment to discern how much starting, increasing, decreasing and stopping you will be asking yourself to do. It's easy to start walking around the world, but circling the globe will be an effort. A lot of this world is ocean, so think that through before you try to walk on water.

Generally, for health and longevity I ask you to focus on shark habits and pirate maps. Shark habits are simply those areas of life that you can take care of with one bite and they're gone. Fill out the form, gas the car, and sign the form—and you're done with it. Just do it.

One bite.

Pirate maps, Pat Flynn's excellent concept for ongoing adherence, tells us the precise steps from here to there. The buried treasure is six feet down from six paces east of the coconut tree in the cove on Blackbeard's Island.

For fitness and performance, most people fall in love with peaking, planning and programming. We all love the idea that in 12 short weeks we'll have a bikini body, be in the best condition of our lives and produce the ultimate performance.

I have discovered, as many have, that the best laid plans of mice and men...well, you know, life gets in the way of plans.

Principles literally mean “to capture first” or “to take first.” *Primus* means “first” and we see it in words ranging from “prince” to “primary school.” *Capere* is “to take,” and most would recognize the root of “capture.”

Simply, if you want to win—to take first—*focus on principles*.
I like to win.

Click here for more information about *Now What?*

