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The Unstoppable Golfer
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Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect

HOW CHAMPIONS THINK

In Sports and in Life

DR. BOB ROTELLA

WITH BOB CULLEN

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To Dad, for being the greatest husband, father, father-in-law, grandfather, and great-grandfather any man could ever hope to be. And to his great-grandchildren, my grandchildren, Lucy, Max, Laura, Thomas, and George, and to all my nieces and nephews, wishing each of you a wonderful life, going for your dreams with passion and enthusiasm.

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HOW CHAMPIONS THINK

1.

What LeBron James Has in Common with Pat Bradley

I HAVE BEEN privileged to spend my life helping people who want to be exceptional. A desire to be exceptional may not in itself strike you as unusual. Everyone, as a kid, has daydreams in which he catches the touchdown pass as time expires to win the Super Bowl, or she pole-vaults sixteen feet to win an Olympic gold medal. But I'm not talking about daydreams or about the unrealized fantasies of many adults. I'm talking about a desire so fierce that it changes a person's life. Exceptional people begin with just such ambitions. From them, I've learned how a champion's thoughts are different from the thoughts of most people. That difference is what this book is about.

I've worked with the winners of eighty-four major golf championships on the men's, women's, and senior tours. I've worked with Olympic gold medalists in the equestrian sports. I've worked with NCAA champions in track and field, soccer, lacrosse, and basketball. I've worked with winners of major

tennis tournaments. Three of the five players in the history of the PGA Tour to shoot a competitive 59—Chip Beck, David Duval, and Jim Furyk—were working with me when they did it. I've worked with exceptionally successful people in the entertainment and business worlds. Each of them has taught me something about the minds of exceptional people.

They have confirmed my belief that the ideas people choose to have about themselves largely determine the quality of the lives they lead. We can choose to believe in ourselves, and thus to strive, to risk, to persevere, and to achieve. Or we can choose to cling to security and mediocrity. We can choose to set no limits on ourselves, to set high goals and dream big dreams. We can use those dreams to fuel our spirits with passion. Or we can become philosophers of the worst kind, inventing ways to rationalize our failures, inventing excuses for mediocrity. We can fall in love with our own abilities and our own potential, then choose to maximize those abilities. Or we can decide that we have no special talents or abilities and try to be happy being safe and comfortable.

As I've worked, I've been troubled at times by the realization that the champions I know are becoming more atypical—*too* exceptional, if you will. Our grandparents and great-grandparents migrated and struggled for many years to give us the freedom we now have, a precious birthright. We're free to choose what we're going to think about ourselves. No one can stop us from chasing our dreams. Yet many people today choose to squander this birthright. They choose to believe that because of where they were born or who their parents are, they don't have a fair chance in life. They're choosing

to believe that the competition—from America and around the world—is just too tough. They're choosing to believe in someone else's talent more than their own. They're choosing to be mediocre.

I'm always telling people that I don't care what their families or their schools or their communities said or thought about them. I tell them, "You're an adult now, and you get to decide." So what's the decision going to be? You get to write your life story. Will you be heroic or just someone trying to get by? Will you be the star or someone sitting on the end of the bench?

I have no trouble with someone who strives to be the best and finishes in the middle of the pack. There's honor in that. I don't see that person as a failure. To the contrary, he will come to the end of his days with a smile on his face, because he spent the time and talent God gave him having a ball, finding out how good he could get. He will not be the person who goes to the grave thinking, "If only I'd been as talented as, say, LeBron James! My life would have been great!"

In fact, such a person doesn't have an inkling of the most important talent LeBron James has. Nor does he know he could have chosen to have that talent himself. I know, because I've heard about it from the source.

Some years ago, I got a call from Lance Blanks, who was then the assistant general manager of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers. I'd known Lance since his days as a basketball player for the University of Virginia, where I taught and helped the athletic program as a sports psychologist. Lance wanted to know if I would spend a day talking with LeBron, then (and

now again) the cornerstone of Cleveland's franchise. I was happy to say yes.

I knew something about LeBron, of course. I knew the outer dimensions. He was six-eight, weighed two hundred fifty chiseled pounds, and had explosive speed. I knew he had been perhaps the most publicized high school basketball player since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was known as Lew Alcindor. I knew he'd been the NBA's number one draft choice the year he finished high school and I knew he'd been a very successful professional for the Cavaliers. But until I had a chance to talk to him, I didn't know the most important thing about LeBron.

"I want to be the greatest basketball player in history," he told me.

"Beautiful," I thought. "This is a truly talented guy."

It was not that he had the physical gifts. It was LeBron's mind.

I've been encountering his kind of attitude on occasion for more than three decades, and when I have encountered it, I have almost always had the pleasure of working with someone truly exceptional. One of my first clients in this category was someone who could hardly have been physically more different from LeBron, professional golfer Pat Bradley. Pat had average size and average clubhead speed; nothing about her initial appearance would suggest athletic ability to most people. And that was not even the most significant difference. LeBron had been a prodigy of whom much was expected from the time he was maybe fourteen years old. Pat had grown up in golfing obscurity. She was a girl from New England, which is not a cradle of golfers because of the short golf season

up north. She hadn't gone to one of the colleges that traditionally has a strong women's golf team. LeBron would have disappointed a lot of people if he hadn't made himself into a great basketball player. Pat, had she been mediocre, would only have confirmed people's expectations. When I met her, she'd been a professional golfer for eleven years, and she'd won one tournament.

I asked her about her dreams and goals.

Almost diffidently, Pat said she wanted to win the LPGA Player of the Year award. She wanted to have the tour's lowest scoring average. She wanted to win all of the women's major championships. And she wanted to make the LPGA Hall of Fame. At the time, an LPGA player had to win thirty tournaments, including two majors, to be eligible for the Hall of Fame. It was the highest Hall of Fame hurdle in sports.

She asked me if I thought she could do these things.

I said, "I don't know if you can do them, but I'm excited to work with someone who has your dreams."

In the next ten years or so, Pat achieved all of those goals. So I certainly didn't discourage LeBron from thinking he could be the greatest. I just asked him where he thought he stood with regard to that goal.

Sometimes, when I ask a client this kind of question, I'll get a response that indicates a troubled mind. A golfer might say that he's got the yips with his putter or his wedges. A singer might say she has stage fright. A businessperson might say that he's freezing up when he makes sales calls. Initially, LeBron's response was less about his mind than about his skills.

"I'm pretty darn good," LeBron said, "but I'm not going to become the greatest basketball player in history if my teams don't win championships, and my teams aren't going to become champions if I don't become a better three-point shooter." (It tends to be forgotten now, but LeBron was not a finished player when he entered the NBA. He made only 29 percent of his three-point attempts in his rookie season.) "Right now, when I get into the playoffs, other teams know that I can't make the three, so they won't even guard me. They just look at me and talk trash to me and say, 'Go ahead and take it. We know you can't make it and you know you can't make it.' "

I wasn't surprised to hear that opposing players would talk trash with LeBron, or that it would bother him. I've worked with enough athletes to know that the godlike images we're fed by the media can often disguise reality. Superstars have doubts and fears just like the rest of us. So I nodded, and LeBron went on.

"I've started to think a little bit on my threes," he acknowledged. "You know, I have some doubt about it."

Yes, I knew. In basketball, as in golf, as in almost any sport involving motor skills, an athlete gets the best results when he *doesn't* think. Once an athlete has learned a skill—as LeBron had learned to shoot a basketball—he needs to trust that skill, focus on the target, and let the shot go without thinking about how to do it or being concerned about the result. In slightly more scientific terms, the subconscious areas of our minds do the best job of controlling motor skills. When the conscious brain gets involved, our bodies tend to become awkward. Doubt has a way of turning on that conscious brain,

which is why confident shooters are better than shooters who lack confidence. A great deal of my work with athletes revolves around teaching them how to keep the conscious mind inactive or quiet when they're performing.

It may surprise some readers to learn that the suggestions I gave to LeBron involved a lot more of what most people would perceive as plain hard work than they involved what most people would consider sports psychology.

I did tell him that I thought he could benefit from one of the standard methods of sports psychology, visualization. I wanted him to see himself making three-point shots. I suggested that he ask the Cavaliers' staff to make a highlight video for him, about eight to twelve minutes long. This video would be a LeBron James long-range shooting montage. It would have LeBron making threes off the dribble. It would show LeBron catching the ball and making threes spotting up. It could have some of LeBron's favorite music in the background, helping him to attach the good feelings associated with that music to the act of shooting threes. He would watch it every night. As he fell asleep, he could conjure up images of himself making three-point shots against tall, quick, tenacious defenders. He could let them fill his dreams.

All of this would help him improve his three-point shooting, because it would feed the right sorts of images to his subconscious, helping him become a more trusting, confident shooter. But if improvement were as easy as watching videos, the NBA would have a lot more great three-point shooters. It isn't. The mental game is a big part of sport, but it must be combined with physical competence.

So I suggested that LeBron hire a shooting coach and work with that coach every day. I told him he needed to make maybe two hundred three-point shots off the dribble every day, imagining the best defender in the league guarding him. I told him he needed to make another two hundred catch-and-shoot three-pointers. I told him I didn't care how many shots it took to make those four hundred three-pointers, or how long it took. If he wanted to be great, he would find the time and find the energy. The actual number of shots I suggested was not as important, in my mind, as the idea that LeBron would set a practice goal for himself, commit to achieving it every day, and wait patiently for results.

I told him patience was essential because I had no way of predicting how long it would take to see improvement in his shooting statistics if he took my suggestions. But the patience and tenacity required were factors that could help him separate himself from his peers. A lot of athletes might undertake an improvement regimen like the one I suggested to LeBron. But not many would stick with it. After a few weeks, if they weren't seeing immediate results, they'd find a reason to quit. Maybe they'd decide the extra practice was wearing them down. Maybe they'd decide that they just didn't have the talent to be a great outside shooter. They'd find a way to talk themselves out of it. To encourage LeBron to persevere, I told him about my belief that great basketball shooters, like great golfers and great baseball hitters, are for the most part made rather than born.

He and Pat Bradley had hard work in common. Pat didn't make it to the LPGA Tour Hall of Fame just because she

wanted to. She used that desire to fuel hours and weeks and years of dedication and practice. Her dreams were her starting point.

With LeBron, I also talked a lot about Bill Russell and Michael Jordan. Unlike golf, basketball is a team game. An essential part of being a great player is, in my mind, playing and conducting yourself in ways that make your teammates better. That, far more than scoring average, is the hallmark of a truly great player. Jordan and Russell were the players LeBron was chasing, because in addition to being great individually, they were players whose teams won many championships. They were great leaders. I suggested that LeBron read about Russell and Jordan and talk to them about leadership whenever he had the chance.

I was very impressed with LeBron James. He was attentive. He asked insightful questions. It was clear that he was disciplined and that he set very high standards for himself. He was more than just a superstar. He was a very coachable athlete on a mission to see how great he could become. I gave him the suggestions I did because I knew that his desire to be the best would empower him. The way he chose to think about himself would drive him through the workouts, the visualization exercises, and all the other things he needed to do to improve. That's why the way he saw himself was his most important talent.

I have noticed a few things since I spoke with LeBron. One is that his three-point shooting has improved dramatically. It's now roughly 40 percent, a one-third improvement over his rookie year. And I noticed, of course, that he switched

teams, giving himself a better chance to win championships. And I have no doubt that the success LeBron has enjoyed is due to the kind of hard work we talked about that day, to his dedication to improvement, and to his strong commitment to team success.

True superstars share his attitude. Not long after I worked with LeBron, I met with the University of Memphis basketball team, then coached by John Calipari and led on the floor by All-American Derrick Rose. I shared with the players how important I thought LeBron's attitude was in his success. A little while later, I got a call from Derrick. He had something he wanted to tell me. "Doc, *I* want to be the greatest basketball player in history," he said.

Derrick went on in 2011 to become the youngest MVP in the history of the NBA. He's suffered some devastating injuries in the last few years, and he's still working very hard to complete his rehabilitation from the subsequent knee surgeries. But if he does manage to heal fully, I'd advise LeBron and anyone else in the NBA to look out for him. Derrick, like LeBron and Pat Bradley, has the champion's first requirement—the attitude he's chosen, the way he's decided to see himself.

The vital importance of that sort of attitude is the foremost thing I have learned about exceptionalism in my decades of work with people striving to be great. Talent, conventionally defined, is of course part of the equation. As Bear Bryant once said, "When was the last time you saw a jackass win the Kentucky Derby?" But there are many people with physical talent, just as there are many people with raw intelligence. I would

venture that most people are talented in something, whether they realize it or not. What sets merely talented people apart from exceptional people can't be measured by vertical leap, or time for the forty-yard dash, or length off the tee, or IQ. It's something internal. Great performers share a way of thinking, a set of attitudes and attributes like optimism, confidence, persistence, and strong will. They all want to push themselves to see how great they can become. These attributes and attitudes cause champions to work harder and smarter than other people as they prepare for competition. They help them stay focused under pressure and to produce their best performances when the stakes are highest.

I am hardly the first observer to notice this. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, it was written that the runner with the best foot speed doesn't always win the race and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. That knowledge persisted into the twentieth century, but the reasons behind it remained obscure. Good coaches pondered it.

When I was a kid, I loved to hang out with such coaches. I had a cousin, Sal Somma, who was the football coach for many decades at New Dorp High School in New York. (There's a street named for him near the high school.) He was a friend and disciple of Vince Lombardi, whose coaching career began not far from New Dorp, at St. Cecilia High School in Englewood, New Jersey. When Sal would visit us in Vermont during school vacations, and when I sat and talked with other coaches, I became aware of the distinction between a "practice player" and a "gamer." Coaches like Sal loved to talk about what distinguished practice players (the failed runner

with the best foot speed or the failed warrior with the greatest strength) from gamers. They knew that winning depended on identifying and developing gamers, and they tried intuitive ways to do it. They might run punishing preseason practices in the summer heat, counting on the practice players to quit and the gamers to identify themselves by their tenacity. They might try pep talks. They might paper their locker rooms with messages about hard work and dedication. John Wooden, during a career that started in the 1920s, thought long and hard about the nature of success and developed a "Pyramid of Success" that he taught to his UCLA basketball teams. All of those things might work, especially in the hands of a master coach and recruiter like Wooden, who won ten NCAA championships. Or they might not work.

At the time, the term "sports psychologist" had yet to be coined. And, in fact, a lot of great athletes from that era, if asked, didn't think it needed to be coined. I remember some years ago my friend Jim Lefebvre, the great ex-Dodger infielder, big league manager, and hitting coach, introduced me to Bob Gibson, the Hall of Fame pitcher of the 1960s and '70s for the St. Louis Cardinals. When Jim told Gibson what I did for a living, Gibson looked at me with what I think was an approximation of the scornful glare he used to direct at hitters.

"We didn't need sports psychology when I was playing," he said.

"Why was that?" I asked.

"Because when I was playing, if anyone ever thought about digging in at the plate, I'd hit him in the head. That was my sports psychology."

Jim and I laughed, the tentative laugh of people who hope, but are not certain, that what they've just heard was meant as a joke.

"Today if you did that they'd throw you out of the game and suspend you," Gibson said. "Hell, if I was pitching today I'd probably need a sports psychologist, too."

I think it was only a coincidence, though, that sports psychology began to emerge as a distinct discipline around the time Gibson retired and baseball tightened its rules against beanballs. Its emergence had more to do with the will to win. Coaches and athletes want to win so much that they're constantly looking for ways to get better. Around 1980, they started giving sports psychologists a chance to help their teams improve. That was the way I got started at the University of Virginia, after I got my PhD and joined the faculty there. The results were impressive enough that today, most every major college athletic program, and a lot of professional teams, has a sports psychologist or two on the staff.

Over time, the discipline has spread into other endeavors, where it's more broadly known as performance psychology. I spend a lot of my time counseling people whose only exposure to athletics might be an occasional round of golf or bowling. They're businessmen or singers or any of a hundred things. But they have performance issues just as athletes do, and the same ideas that help athletes improve can help them.

I don't think it's any coincidence that sports psychology emerged first in America, because I think of it as deeply rooted in the American psyche and the American culture, at least as that culture used to be. My grandparents, like the forebears

of millions of people, came to America with little or nothing. They didn't choose America because they wanted anything handed to them or given to them. They just wanted to be in a place where, if they worked hard and had some good ideas, they could rise to the middle class or even higher. They wanted to be in a place where no one was going to stop them because of their last name or their father's station in life. Performance psychology fits neatly into that ethos.

Striving to be exceptional is never easy. But when people tell me that what I'm suggesting they do won't be easy, I just say, "You're right!" Going after big ideas takes sweat. It takes persistence, patience, and a bedrock belief in yourself. Not everyone will do it. That's why we call it trying to be exceptional.

I never, by the way, try to define "exceptional" for a client. For some of the people I work with, it may be defined by championships won. For others, it may be defined by money earned and the things that money can buy. For some people, it might be defined by a helping career in which they save souls or teach impoverished kids. I don't care *what* a person's dreams are. I care about *how* a person lives his life.

I care about whether a person refuses to place limits on himself and instead chases greatness. If a golfer tells me that his goal is maintaining his playing privileges by finishing in the top 125 on the PGA Tour, I'll challenge him. "Who are the one hundred twenty-four players you think are better than you, and why?" If someone tells me she's going to be an entrepreneur, I don't want to hear that she dreams of merely making a living. I want her to have extravagant dreams, to dream

of creating a wildly successful, innovative company that will give wealth to her and her family and good jobs to many more people. If he wants to be a teacher, I don't want to hear that he aspires to get tenure, punch a clock for three decades, and retire in modest comfort. I want to hear that he has a passion to use his life and his talents giving hundreds, or thousands, of kids a better start in life. I want to help people like that.

I do it by teaching the attitudes and habits of an exceptional life. I teach what champions think. Whatever a person's aspirations might be, these qualities and these ways of thinking will support those aspirations. They'll help him keep his commitments and persist in working to improve. They'll help her come through in the clutch and overcome setbacks. They'll help him respond effectively to competition. They're not a mystery. They're not something that's either in your genes or not in your genes, like blue eyes. They can be learned. They're what this book is about.

The first essential quality is optimism.

2.

Learning to Be Optimistic

I HAD A privileged upbringing.

It wasn't that the Rotella family had a lot of money. We didn't. We were never hungry, but a lot of the food on our table consisted of vegetables we grew ourselves.

When I say I was privileged, I mean that my childhood taught me to be optimistic. I didn't know it then, but I realize now that this was a precious gift. Exceptional people, I have found, either start out being optimistic or learn to be optimistic because they realize that they can't get what they want in life without being optimistic. That's why I say I was privileged. I didn't have to learn optimism. It was given to me.

I don't mean that my mother and father, in the manner of some of today's parents, ever worried about my self-esteem. They didn't. They didn't praise me unless I did something praiseworthy. To the contrary, if I did less than my best at something, I got no credit for making a halfhearted effort. If my chore for the day was cutting the grass, and I didn't complete the job with neat edges, I did it over when my dad came

home. I remember a day when I was working with my father to fix some window trim. I was nailing it in, and I hit a nail incorrectly and bent it. I was about to just pound the bent nail in, but when you bend a nail, the sound is quite different from that of a nail being struck properly and driven in straight. My dad was about ten yards away, and he heard it. Before I could continue, he came over to me and said, "What are you doing? You think we're going to paint over a bent nail? That's going to be your finished product? How can you live with that?"

I pulled out the bent nail and started over.

My dad believed passionately, and still believes, in education. It was an attitude he got from his father and the community he grew up in. He taught me that America is a great place for anyone who gets an education and takes advantage of it. He insisted that we do as well as possible in school. That usually meant As, though if he was persuaded that we were doing our best in a subject that was difficult for us, he would tolerate a B. He never told us what to do with our lives. He just taught us that we could do anything we wanted if we got an education, set our minds to it, and did our best. I learned to believe that with hard work, you *could* be the best.

That's optimism.

It may not be as natural for people growing up today to feel optimistic as it was for me and many others in my generation. Instead of seeing examples of people succeeding and progressing, they can find it all too easy to see examples of people struggling. Sometimes, when I'm visiting my hometown of Rutland, Vermont, I'm asked to speak to groups of young people. I remember a girl recently asking me, "How do you get