



Inside the Mind of a Winner: Lessons from Sports Psychology for Entrepreneurs

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Entrepreneurship - Corporate Training

Introduction

Startups and competitive sports share a striking resemblance: both demand high levels of resilience, rapid decision-making under pressure, and relentless pursuit of excellence. In sports, victory is measured by championships and medals; in entrepreneurship, it's by disruptive innovation, user adoption, and market capture. While many startup approaches focus on technical skills or market strategies, few explore the psychological dimension—the inner game that determines whether an entrepreneur thrives or fails.

This is where the work of Bill Beswick, one of the world's leading sports psychologists, becomes highly relevant. Known for coaching elite teams, such as Manchester United, and working with Olympic athletes, Beswick has distilled decades of psychological insight into a framework for developing what he calls the *"mind of a winner."* His ideas, although rooted in sports, offer transformative applications for the startup world, particularly for entrepreneurs navigating the challenges of early-stage ventures.

The Startup Arena: A High-Performance Environment

Just as elite sports teams navigate volatile, outcome-driven environments demanding continuous dedication, startups face similar challenges. Bill Beswick asserts that genuine winners possess not just a desire for victory, but a commitment to preparing for it. This principle translates to entrepreneurship through rigorous preparation, strategic focus, and mental fortitude.

Entrepreneurs face emotional highs and lows, from funding rejections and product failures to market pivots and scaling challenges. What separates successful founders from the rest is not just intelligence or creativity, but mental toughness: the ability to maintain focus, motivation, and clarity under stress. In this sense, Beswick's insights help frame this psychological resilience as a skill that can be trained and refined.

Four Levels of Commitment: Which One Are You?

In his lectures and writings, Beswick describes four levels of commitment observed in athletes:

1. *Show Up* – Participation without ambition.
2. *Compete* – Effortful engagement with external benchmarks.
3. *Train to Win* – Intentionally pushing limits to gain a competitive edge.
4. *Train to Dominate* – Relentlessly pursuing mastery, regardless of immediate rewards.



These levels directly map onto entrepreneurial behavior. Many people "show up" by attending startup-related events. Few actually "compete" by launching a viable product or seeking funding. Even fewer "train to win" by validating their product-market fit through iterative testing. A tiny number of all are those who "train to dominate": entrepreneurs who internalize success principles, practice disciplined execution, and proactively prepare to outperform. As Beswick puts it, *"It's one thing to want to win. It's another thing to be prepared to do everything it takes to win, every single day."*

1. Show Up – *Participation Without Ambition*

At this level, the individual is present but not fully invested. In sports, this is the player who attends practice but doesn't train hard, avoids feedback, and doesn't care whether they improve. They're just "there." In entrepreneurship, the "show up" entrepreneur likes the idea of being a founder but avoids the hard parts—validating an idea, handling rejection, or taking risks. They might attend startup events, talk about building a startup, or post ideas on LinkedIn, but they rarely move from talk to action. Common traits are:

- Passive learning (e.g., engaging in entrepreneurship training without any practical application)
- Procrastination as a manifestation of fear of failure.
- Seeking status rather than pursuing meaningful goals

For example, joining an incubator to enhance a resume but neglecting to perfect a pitch or validate a business. Or students submitting a business idea for a class project, but without the intention of pursuing it seriously after graduation. In this case, "showing up" is the bare minimum. It's better than doing nothing, but without ambition or consistent effort, it rarely leads to growth or meaningful outcomes.

2. Compete – *Effortful Engagement with External Benchmarks*

This is the athlete who takes the game seriously. They train, strive to improve, and want to win. But their motivation often comes from comparison—beating others, proving people wrong, or seeking validation. In entrepreneurship, the "compete" entrepreneur wants traction. They apply for pitch competitions, track their performance, and hustle to raise money or attract media attention. They're serious, but often externally motivated. The danger is becoming more focused on optics (growth hacks, virality) than substance (solving real problems, building sustainable systems). The most common traits are:

- Chases funding, awards, or social recognition
- Tracks performance based on what other competitors are doing
- Strong ambition, but inconsistent depth of purpose



Entrepreneurs sometimes launch startups and quickly secure seed funding, partly because their peers are doing the same. However, a focus on immediate gains, such as releasing a flashy MVP or rapidly growing the client base, can overshadow the essential work of understanding customers and developing the product long-term. Although competition can spur progress, it frequently leads to a focus on short-term victories. Ultimately, true success relies on internal motivation and personal growth, rather than solely on outperforming competitors.

3. Train to Win – *Intentionally Pushing Limits to Gain a Competitive Edge*

At this level, individuals deliberately seek out discomfort and challenge because they understand it's the path to mastery. These are athletes who stay after practice, review film, and study their weaknesses to improve. Their goal isn't just to play but to win. In entrepreneurship, "Train to win" entrepreneurs are obsessed with details. They study business models, test hypotheses, and deeply understand their customers. They're still focused on outcomes, but now those outcomes are more strategic, such as product-market fit and sustainable growth. Common traits are:

- Practices deliberate learning and feedback loops
- Balances vision with execution discipline
- Builds systems and teams around clear long-term goals

For example, consider Melanie Perkins, founder of Canva. She spent years refining the idea, raising money, and building the team, despite countless rejections. Her focus wasn't on a flashy launch but on building a tool that solved a real design pain point for millions. Her long-term orientation gave Canva a defensible edge. This level reflects professionalism with purpose. Success is not an accident; it is engineered through repetition, discipline, and self-imposed standards.

4. Train to Dominate – *Relentlessly Pursuing Mastery, Regardless of Immediate Rewards*

This is the pinnacle. These individuals don't just want to win—they want to redefine the game. They train at a level far beyond what's required, not because they need to, but because they want to push the boundaries of their potential. In sports, these are athletes like Michael Jordan or Serena Williams, who trained not only harder but smarter, with a near-obsessive focus on growth. Their discipline didn't come from fear of losing but from commitment and attachment to the process. In entrepreneurship, "Train to dominate" founders are mission-driven and obsessed with long-term impact. They don't measure success only by rounds raised or IPOs—they measure it by the value created, the lives changed, and the systems they've helped transform.

They embrace sacrifice, adapt constantly, and build for scale with integrity. They study not only startups, but psychology, systems thinking, human behavior—anything that makes them better leaders, thinkers, and builders. Common traits are:

- Self-motivated mastery over external validation
- Visionary thinking anchored in day-to-day excellence
- Willingness to endure hardship without a guaranteed payoff

For example, Elon Musk fits this profile. Whether you agree with his methods or not, his pattern of pushing the edge of what's possible—building rockets, electric vehicles, AI chips—is not about quick wins. His ambition spans decades. Similarly, people like Jeff Bezos spent years investing in infrastructure and logistics, knowing returns would come much later. This level is about legacy, not trophies. It's where mastery, mission, and discipline converge—and where elite founders are made. Here's a visual summary of the progression:

Table 1: Putting it all Together: Which Level are you at?

Level	Mindset	Motivation	Behavior
Show Up	Passive presence	Low or unclear	Talks more than acts
Compete	Active, externally focused	Win against others	Works hard, seeks recognition
Train to Win	Purpose-driven, excellence-focused	Win the right way	Builds deliberately, learns continuously
Train to Dominate	Visionary mastery	Be the best version of yourself	Relentless growth, values process over reward

Climbing the Commitment Ladder

The transition between these levels isn't automatic. It takes self-awareness, discipline, and support. Many founders begin by "showing up" but stay stuck at "compete," burning out by chasing short-term wins. Those who break through do so by changing how they define success. They shift from:

- Beating others to beating yesterday's self
- Chasing results to mastering the process
- Avoiding discomfort to seeking growth through challenge

Bill Beswick's framework is powerful because it invites honest self-reflection. Ask yourself:

- Where are you now?
- What would it take to move to the next level?
- Who do you need to become to stay there?

Whether you're launching your first startup or leading a growing company, the climb to "train to dominate" is both humbling and transformational. And it begins with the decision to go beyond participation—to commit to mastery.

The Three Questions Every Entrepreneur Must Ask

Beswick proposes three deceptively simple questions to test an individual's resolve:

1. What do you want?
2. How badly do you want it?
3. What are you prepared to suffer to get it?

These questions serve as a psychological audit. In a startup context, clarity around the first question—"What do you want?"—is *foundational*. Do you want to build a billion-dollar company, disrupt an industry, or solve a meaningful problem? Vague goals yield vague outcomes.

The second question *probes passion*. Building a startup involves 80-hour weeks, frequent rejection, and constant ambiguity. Superficial desire won't sustain you through this.

The third question—"What are you prepared to suffer?"—is the real separator. Are you willing to delay gratification, endure failures, or pivot after sunk costs? Entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and Sara Blakely didn't just want success—they accepted, even embraced, the suffering it required.

1. What Do You Want? – *The Clarity of Vision*

This question may seem deceptively basic, but it is profoundly important. It challenges individuals to define their true objective with specificity and purpose. In entrepreneurship, many aspiring founders say they want to "succeed" or "build something impactful"—but these are vague ambitions. Beswick's question requires precision. In other words, are you aiming to:

- Create a scalable startup valued in the billions (like Uber or Airbnb)?
- Solve a deeply personal or social problem (like Khan Academy or TOMS Shoes, which gives 1/3 of profits for supporting equity initiatives)?
- Achieve financial independence through steady, bootstrapped growth?
- Build a legacy company that transforms an industry?

Why does this matter?

Clarity fuels strategy. If you don't know exactly what you're aiming for, you can't reverse-engineer the steps to achieve it. Vague desires lead to scattered efforts. Focused goals, on the other hand, inform your decisions—from the type of investors you attract to the team you build and the markets you pursue. Peter Drucker, the father of modern



management, famously said, “What gets measured gets managed.” But even *before measurement, you must define your target*. This is the core of strategic entrepreneurship: start with a clear, desired outcome, then work backwards.

2. How Badly Do You Want It? – *The Measure of Desire*

The second question probes the emotional intensity behind your ambition. It moves *beyond intellectual interest to emotional commitment*. Many people love the idea of being a founder, the autonomy, the recognition, the dream of financial success. However, entrepreneurship is primarily about being emotionally tough and resilient. The desire to succeed must be strong enough to power you through:

- Repeated rejection (from investors, customers, even friends)
- Uncertainty and risk (months or years without guaranteed income)
- Loneliness (founders often report feelings of isolation)
- Failures and setbacks (failed launches, product pivots, internal conflict)

If your desire is shallow, these obstacles will derail you. But if it's deep, fueled by personal mission, passion, or a sense of purpose, you'll persist. For example, when Sara Blakely founded Spanx, she spent two years cold-calling hosiery mills. Everyone turned her down. She believed so deeply in her product that she kept going, eventually landing a deal with Neiman Marcus and launching a billion-dollar brand. She wanted it badly enough to face near-constant rejection. This aligns with Angela Duckworth's research on grit—a combination of passion and sustained perseverance toward long-term goals. The more deeply you want something, the more likely you are to endure the process of achieving it.

3. What Are You Prepared to Suffer to Get It? – *The Willingness to Endure*

This is the most revealing question. It draws a clear line between daydreaming and actual pursuit. Everyone wants something, and many want it badly, but very few are willing to suffer for it. Suffering, in this context, doesn't mean self-inflicted misery; it means sacrifice, discomfort, and emotional labor. Examples include:

- Delayed gratification: Working years before significant revenue or reward.
- Opportunity cost: Skipping stable careers, vacations, or social life.
- Financial risk: Living lean or investing your savings.
- Ego bruises: Hearing your idea called "unrealistic" or "naïve."
- Mental fatigue: Juggling ambiguity, exhaustion, and pressure.

This question exposes the hidden price of greatness. Successful entrepreneurs embrace the suffering as part of the journey, not as an obstacle to it. For example, Elon Musk famously risked his fortune from PayPal to fund Tesla and SpaceX, at one point borrowing money for rent. He didn't just want to build transformative companies; he was prepared to suffer repeated failures, public ridicule, and the real possibility of bankruptcy to do it. This idea can echo Nietzsche's principle: *"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."*

Entrepreneurs who understand their “why” (vision) are far more equipped to endure the “how” (the suffering). You can think of these three questions as a psychological funnel:

Table 2: Integrating the Three Questions as a Framework

Question	Function
What do you want?	Defines the goal
How badly do you want it?	Measures motivation
What are you prepared to suffer?	Test commitment and resilience

When you use these three questions as a regular self-assessment, it becomes a form of mental conditioning. Instead of fantasizing about success, you focus on the process, the costs, and the effort—exactly the elements that make success sustainable.

The Inner Audit for Entrepreneurial Excellence

Bill Beswick’s three questions are not only about assessing your ambition—they’re about deepening it. They force you to confront the realities of your goals and ask whether you have the internal resources to match your external dreams. In entrepreneurship, these questions are invaluable. They help you:

- Set strategic, meaningful goals (not just chase trends)
- Clarify your emotional commitment (beyond superficial enthusiasm)
- Prepare mentally for the costs and trade-offs (so you’re not surprised when they arrive)

These aren’t just motivational tools—they’re diagnostic instruments. If your answers aren’t clear, strong, and honest, then you’re not ready. But if they are, you’re better equipped than most to endure the journey from idea to impact.

From Victim to Fighter: Shaping the Entrepreneurial Identity

Beswick emphasizes the binary choice between a “victim mindset” and a “fighter mindset.” Every day, individuals choose whether they will react passively to adversity or respond proactively. In the entrepreneurial journey, this means confronting failure not as evidence of inadequacy but as raw data for growth. This echoes the views of Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, whose research on the growth mindset shows that individuals who view challenges as learning opportunities are more likely to persevere and ultimately succeed. Consider the case of Airbnb. In its early days, the founders maxed out credit cards and sold novelty cereal boxes to keep the company afloat. Rather than succumbing to a victim narrative, they adopted a fighter mindset—using creativity and resilience to survive until they could thrive. As Beswick puts it: *“Winners are not born; they are made, every day, by the decisions they make and the mindset they choose.”*

Small Habits, Big Impact: Excellence Is a Lifestyle

One of Beswick's most underrated teachings is the emphasis on "small things done well." He recounts a moment where a team captain redefined professionalism as "being on time, dressed right, ready to go." Such habits, though mundane, create a culture of discipline and accountability. For entrepreneurs, this may mean simple things like:

- Starting meetings on time.
- Sending follow-up emails.
- Keeping promises to customers and teammates.
- Preparing thoroughly for investor pitches.

These micro-behaviors signal reliability and maturity—qualities that investors, co-founders, and employees notice and value. James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, reinforces this idea: "*You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.*" Yes, consistent routines and habits make the final difference.

The Inner Game of Entrepreneurship: Self-Talk and Identity

Beswick also highlights the importance of self-talk and internal narratives. High-performing athletes use affirmations, visualization, and identity-building to enhance performance. Entrepreneurs can do the same. In her TED Talk, psychologist Kelly McGonigal suggests that stress is not the enemy—it's how you interpret stress that matters. According to this, founders who reframe stress as excitement or a call to action tend to have higher performance under pressure. The language you use with yourself—"I'm overwhelmed" vs "This is a growth moment"—can shape outcomes. Beswick argues that athletes should "change their story" to become better performers. Entrepreneurs, too, must shift from "I'm not ready" to "I'm learning," from "This is hard" to "This is training."

Team Dynamics: From Individual Brilliance to Collective Excellence

Startups, like sports teams, are a network of integrated efforts. Beswick warns against the "solo hero" archetype, stressing that the best athletes learn to subordinate personal glory to team success. This lesson is crucial in entrepreneurship, where founder disputes or misaligned teams can destroy promising ventures. Effective startup leaders cultivate psychological safety—a term popularized by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson—to ensure that team members feel safe to voice ideas and concerns. Without this, innovation is stifled and execution suffers. Beswick's coaching mantra—"*strong minds, united purpose*"—is a blueprint for startup cultures. Founders must shape not just business plans or business models but belief systems. They must coach their teams, celebrate effort, and define success beyond vanity metrics.

Excellence is Intentional: The Path Forward

Success in entrepreneurship is not a lottery; it's a practice. Beswick's philosophy champions intentional preparation, mental toughness, and disciplined execution—principles that every founder can adopt regardless of background. In short, cultivating the “mind of a winner” involves:

- Clarity of purpose: Know what you want and why.
- Depth of commitment: Train beyond competence; aim for mastery.
- Emotional resilience: Reframe adversity as an opportunity.
- Consistent habits: Small wins compound.
- Team-first mentality: Build people, not just products.

The late Kobe Bryant, a paragon of Beswick-style mental discipline, once said, “*Rest at the end, not in the middle.*” For entrepreneurs willing to embrace that ethos, the startup arena can become a proving ground—not just for products, but for personal greatness.

Further Reading and Resources:

- Beswick, B. (2015). *Changing Your Story*. Heroic Books.
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- Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic Habits*. Avery.
- McGonigal, K. (2013). *How to Make Stress Your Friend* [TED Talk]. https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend
- *Changing the Game Project* Podcast. Episode #258 with Bill Beswick. <https://changingthegameproject.com>

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