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MY JOURNEY

First say to yourself what you would be;
and then do what you have to do

Epictetus

Heathrow, Terminal Five, 2024

I'm sinking into the plush leather seat. London's lights are fading beneath a blanket of clouds. As the air hostess hands me the Wi-Fi details – it is crumpled and binned. Wi-Fi on a transatlantic flight? Not for me. These flights are my sanctuary for calm and reflection, undisturbed by the chaos below.

Pausing for a moment. A whirlwind of a week – late nights, jet lag, and constant pressure. My mind still racing, rewinding to the first spark that set everything in motion. Gratitude surging in, a rare moment of calm, or perhaps just the eye of the storm. It had all come together, a surreal feeling, like watching someone else's life unfold.

The week began with the chaos of a simulated hostage rescue. My pulse accelerating with excitement. The cracking and thumping of machine guns are still ringing in my ears. Days ago, I'd landed from Australia, fresh from launching our new Sydney office, hiring the next generation of super traders.

Back in London, I'm walking on to a stage, a nervous smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, 400 eyeballs zeroing in on me. I'm delivering a keynote to a group I've admired for years.

In Ibiza, days later, I'm playing five-a-side. Eyes wide. The Champions League winner drops his shoulder, weaving past me, as he plays a beautiful "one-two" with an England international. The ball smashing into the back of the net as I stand rooted to the spot – like the amateur I am.

Next up, I'm hosting a private dinner in a room I never imagined I would be in. I'm flanked by an international football manager, a market wizard, and the commanding officer of an elite military unit.

My role in all these events? Simple. Aligning everyone with the principles to which this book is dedicated. To maximise performance. In all these arenas, just like in life, the smallest adjustments can lead to the most extraordinary outcomes.

'The smallest adjustments can lead to the
most extraordinary outcomes'

A grateful chuckle escapes me. I swear I must be the luckiest guy alive to be able to collaborate with such incredible performers. As we hit cruising altitude, the engines unwind. Calm washes over me, I exhale slowly, with a soft smile on my face. My mind rewinding to when I was six, a day when everything changed for me.

Note: If you're a bit like me, you might want to get straight to the point; so feel free to skip to Chapter 2. If you want the backstory, though, keep reading.

Sardinia, Italy, 1991

Today, I get to go to work with Dad. Twenty minutes in, I'm standing on a sunbaked runway, the heat shimmering off the tarmac. Beside me, Dad is giving a crisp nod to the pilot, the sun's rays reflecting off his lenses like beacons of focus and intensity, portals to a mind locked on nothing but the mission ahead. My jaw dropping. This was indistinguishable from a scene out of *Top Gun*.

In an instant, a deafening blast erupts. The Tornado GR4 fighter jet engines roar. My pulse races. This is it. Spitting blue fire, the ground beneath me shaking as the fighter jet, surging forward faster and faster, launching past Dad and I, down the runway, before cracking the sky open – rocketing into the heavens at Mach 1. In the blink of an eye, the aircraft was gone, swallowed by the horizon.

In my six-year-old brain, the whole world shook. Blinking slowly, my eyes fixed on the sky, there was an explosion of curiosity and possibility. The spark was lit. A lifelong fascination with excellence was born. Everything I experienced from there continued to fan the flames. I didn't want to make an Airfix kit or obsess over pilots. I wanted answers. I was fixated on this question: *Why? Why do they get to fly the fighter jet?* And most significantly: *Is doing cool things like this a realistic option for us all?*

Edinburgh, Scotland

The Sardinian runway lit a fire in me. Years later, we had moved to a stonewashed, terraced, two-bedroom council house back in the UK, but the fire was still burning. My imagination was flitting between the skyscrapers of Wall Street, the roaring crowds of Wembley, and Iranian Embassy sieges. While my friends were acquiring expertise in dinosaurs and Lego, my eyes, burning with stubborn resolve, were struggling their way through biographies of elite performers – entrepreneurs like Branson, athletes like Beckham, and Special Forces Commanders like de la Billière. Fascination wasn't enough; I was determined to uncover the secrets that drove their excellence.

I found school challenging. More mayhem than maths. My eyes would glaze over as the words on the pages blurred. I found it hard to focus unless I saw a clear, practical outcome. Staring out the window, lost in faraway thought, dreaming up ways of assembling a business empire, lacing up for Chelsea, or reenacting the guerrilla warfare missions I was reading about. I thought I'd have to figure out how to do all this on my own.

I had no interest in going to university – but Mum and my head teacher had other plans. Reluctantly I decided to visit a few. One of them was the University of Edinburgh. If you've ever had a gut feeling that you're exactly where you're meant to be, that is the exact feeling I had when I visited Edinburgh. Plus, there was a critical revelation – I discovered that I could actually study the things I'd been obsessing over – excellence. They had answers.

I ended up spending five transformative years immersing myself in the science of performance at the University of Edinburgh. The only course of its kind in the world at the time.

It intimidated the hell out of me, but it was also the most exhilarating feeling. The grand arches and marble floors, not to mention my Essex accent standing out like a sore thumb. Edinburgh was nothing like school. Academic work suddenly became competitive. People wanted to be number one. Plus, I literally couldn't afford to f**k this up. Did I deserve to even be here?

But my tense shoulders and clenched hands were quickly replaced with sharpened focus, determination surging through me. The competitive atmosphere fueled me. It was inspiring, too; the faces on bank notes had studied here – Charles Darwin, Adam Smith, and David Hume. It was my duty to give it my all, to seize the opportunity I'd been given. I wanted to prove I deserved to be there, even if I didn't quite believe it yet.

Most importantly, the questions that had exploded into my six-year-old brain on that runway in Sardinia were being answered by the world's leading professors in this field. Lectures on expertise, mastery, and the philosophy of science had my hand shooting up uncontrollably with a "Can you say that again?" I'd glance left and right to my classmates, wide-eyed. "Did you hear that?" Nodding ever so slightly with every point that resonated. I had become that guy. Geek mode had been fully activated.

The fire within me was roaring. I couldn't understand why every political leader, military commander, sports manager, and business owner wasn't here soaking up this goldmine of knowledge. The excitement to discover that we know how excellence emerges, why certain individuals and organisations excel, and the science that drives the mechanics of this process – it had all been confirmed by thousands of scientific studies. Yes, the science was (and still is) messy, complex, and challenging to understand, let alone apply. But I was salivating at its immense potential.

James A. King

'We know how excellence emerges, why certain individuals and organisations excel, and the science that drives the mechanics of this process'

Not everyone shared my enthusiasm. I would often reflect: *What good is all this incredible information if it remains stuck in this room?* By the end of my time at Edinburgh, I was tired of laboratory testing and writing essays. I felt trapped in abstract concepts, and real-world applications were spinning in my head as I imagined all the places I could be testing all of this.

I wanted to jump in, take control, to make things get better faster. My foot tapping restlessly against the floor. I wanted to see the science change lives. I hated wasting time, especially when I could see a clear path forward. I needed action. To test the principles myself. The only question was: *Where to start?*

Somewhere Cold And Wet

I had zero interest in observing from the sidelines; I wanted to live it. There was a calling I couldn't ignore, a calling to truly know what it meant to experience elite performance. I wanted to see firsthand how elite organisations select, develop, and then pressure-test potential talent into peak performers.

Chin held high, convinced I had it all figured out, I decided to plunge headfirst into the deep end of an arduous selection process with an elite unit in the British army, regarded as one of the most brutal selection courses globally. Failure wasn't just a possibility here – it was the likely outcome. I was ambitious and naively arrogant, plus I had all the secrets, didn't I?

Nothing could have braced me for what was about to happen. Stood to attention in a cold, steel hangar on day one, shoulders square, boots gleaming, my heart pounding with anticipation. My mind racing through everything I'd read, trained for, and anticipated – I was ready. This was it – the moment theory met reality. Then suddenly, *TWHACK*, the door was booted off its hinges. It had begun. A tightening knot in my stomach set in. *What the hell have I just gotten myself into?* There was no turning back now.

Six months had passed since we began the course. The idea of quitting was growing larger with every passing minute. Two hundred of us had been whittled down to five. Exhaustion blurring the edges of my vision, and doubt was clawing at me from every angle – it wasn't just the theory that needed testing, it was me. The real battle wasn't the snow, cold, pain, or whatever I was enduring physically; it was my own mind. This was no longer about performance; it was about survival.

'The real battle wasn't the snow, cold, pain... it
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As the final tasking came through, with just thirty-six hours to go, I felt the floor dropping from under me, a hollow feeling spreading through my chest. I was done. The air felt thick and suffocating. The weight of the challenge had finally broken me.

In that moment, I was no longer the driven performance guy with all the answers – I was a broken version of myself. I was convinced the task laid before us was insurmountable, a cruel joke, and, quite frankly, dangerous. Every muscle in my body was screaming with frustration – a mix of anger, pain, and exhaustion.

Fast-forward thirty-six hours. Blinking rapidly, my mouth hanging open, a half laugh escaped my lips while trying to process what I had just experienced. I was in a state of disbelief; utterly

ashamed of my mental state only thirty-six hours earlier. Wide-eyed, drenched in a chaotic blend of sweat, snow, ice, mud, and blood – a badge of honour. I was proved wrong – I'd made it.

I had completely underestimated what the human brain and body is capable of when put under the right conditions. Sayings like “When you think you're f****d, you're probably only around 40 percent f****d” suddenly made sense. I could almost feel the synapses sparking to life, forging these lessons into my brain. A shift in my mindset had taken place.

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Experiencing elite performance firsthand was the punch in the face that shattered all my plans. In a brutal initiation, a “welcome to the jungle” moment, the theory had met unforgiving reality. Sterile, controlled, and theoretical had been switched out for raw, chaotic, and punishing. Thankfully, through moments like this – throwing my own hat in the ring – I was transitioning from someone who was studying elite performance to someone who was experiencing it.

The gap between the classroom and the real world was wider than I had imagined. Suddenly, 80 percent of what I thought I knew was laughably irrelevant. The tidy formulas and neat conclusions I was celebrating at Edinburgh were abstract and disconnected. At least now I could put all that to the side, zeroing in, refining the 20 percent that really matters.

Fatigue, stress, nerves – terms we used in the lab. These are not the right words to capture the depths of what we endure in the real world. The true reality is more like: your eyes rolling to the back of your skull with exhaustion, fear pulling you to the edge of sanity, staring into the abyss, doubting everything you ever believed in.

'Fatigue, stress, nerves – terms we used in the lab. These are not the right words to capture the depths of what we endure in the real world'

Experiencing all this was essential in becoming the person capable of deploying those principles in the real world as a positive force. I was developing instinct, learning what tools, when, in what order, and in what dose were necessary to overcome each breaking point, to stack the odds of success. Learning through doing, I was internalising all these lessons. A tangible shift in my understanding had taken root. But there was one crucial mindset shift that changed everything.

Standing in the freezing black of night, my heart still pounding through my chest, eyes steady and unblinking, I vowed to NEVER! EVER! underestimate anyone's potential again. I became utterly convinced that as long as the right strategy and effort were in play, there is no upper limit to what these principles can achieve. A still, calm intensity settling over me, the matter had been decided. There is always a way, and from now on I was going to make it my job to find it.

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My thoughts racing with possibilities, always a few steps ahead, rattling with images of a mission way bigger than me. Envisioning the good these principles could achieve if applied at scale was sending shivers down my spine. I was itching. I wanted

to expand, to push boundaries. I just needed someone who would give me the opportunity to do so. Every second I wasn't pushing the principles forward felt like a second wasted.

Nobu, Mayfair, London

A few years later that opportunity came from nowhere. I found myself at a dinner that would change the trajectory of my life. There sat Muwaffaq, leaning back, swirling his glass of wine. Muwaffaq was a force of nature and former Goldman Sachs super trader. Nodding along politely, I had no idea that over the next year Muwaffaq would reshape so much of what I thought I knew.

Muwaffaq had a challenge and needed help. So there we were, seated for dinner in Nobu. It was my debut in fine dining – even the air tasted expensive to me. Michelin stars and food as an art form were all very new and intimidating. Fumbling clumsily, sashimi slipping through my chopsticks, Muwaffaq had seen enough. “Do you want a fork?” he asked. Defeated, laughing it off with a smile while dying inside, I nodded, accepting the silverware as a lifeline.

Muwaffaq leaned in, eyes sharp with a quiet ferocity – the vision was clear. Muwaffaq described the culture of excellence he wanted to create, a team moulded in his own image of unyielding intensity, unshakeable belief, and unparalleled work ethic. And that's where I came in. Despite all Muwaffaq's personal success, he was struggling to scale his expertise. What truly amazed me, though, was Muwaffaq's humility. Here was a man who had mastered his craft, yet recognised that expertise in one field didn't make him an expert in all. In this case: excellence. Shifting in his seat, in a calm but sincere voice, he said, “I'd appreciate your take on this.” He was truly ready to absorb what was offered.

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That night, Muwaffaq and I sat for hours, dissecting the science of performance, the conversation flowing from the trading floor to the stadium, then the battlefield. The air around us felt charged. The principles took on new life as we unravelled their application to trading. Muwaffaq shared his experiences in banking, a world seemingly bleeding potential daily, just like in so many other industries I see. Progress leaking everywhere – waste infuriated us both.

Then, with a steady look, Muwaffaq took a leap of faith. “Bring this company into alignment with these principles,” he said to me. Someone who had achieved so much, looking to me for answers? It was thrilling, but also a little bit terrifying.

At that point, all I had were optimistic theories and personal experiences – potential, not proof. There was nothing concrete I had delivered. My hands clenched slightly under the table, that realisation gnawing at me. What if it didn't work? What if I missed something critical? His entire company – real careers, real lives – were on the line. What if I wasn't as capable as I believed? The gap between doing this for myself and doing this at scale began to feel like a chasm. And in those first few months, I wasn't sure if I'd made the right call.

But it was also thrilling; trading was the perfect petri dish for me. Why? In trading, there's no bullshit, no excuses – just numbers; it's truly meritocratic. Every day, you get a score. You delivered or you didn't. Plus, the competition? Fierce, brilliant minds, the hardest workers to compete with and against.

James A. King

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Fast-forward two and a half years, and Muwaffaq, on a sun-drenched beach in Singapore, was checking in periodically on Zoom. Meanwhile, in London, I was leading one of the most successful proprietary trading floors in the London and Wall Street exchanges, based on risk-adjusted returns of over 3,000 percent. Our now super traders had not obtained better results due to superior genetics, working harder, or elevated ambition. Now, we were channeling their ambition, talents, and effort more effectively. The right people, under the right conditions, at the right times. This is what was enabling us to accelerate our pursuit of excellence. It felt like we couldn't lose money if we tried.

'The right people, under the right conditions,
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If you had told me three years earlier that I'd be leading this team of super traders, I would have laughed you out of the room and probably cried a little. Shattering expectations, we did \$42 million that year (net profit), all generated by individuals who weren't in the organisation three years earlier. Multiple performers 10x'ing the Goldman Sachs twenty-five-year industry expert in one-fifth the time. These principles worked here, too, and at scale.

Note: To date, the talent identification and development pipeline I once sketched on a whiteboard has delivered almost \$2 billion in net profit.

JFK, New York, USA

The seat belt sign lights up and chimes; my passage of calm and reflection is sadly coming to an end. Time to flick the switch and get back to business. Descending through the clouds towards JFK, the Manhattan skyline emerging in the distance, skyscrapers rising from the city below.

Catching my breath for a moment – not from the view but from the realisation that now, in a twist of fate I could only have dreamed of on that runway with Dad, the very individuals whose biographies I once pored over as a child, admiring from a distance, were now turning to me when the stakes are highest, and they need solutions. A flutter in my stomach emerging – that full-circle moment is something I treasure.

'The very individuals whose biographies I once pored over as a child... were now turning to me when the stakes are highest, and they need solutions... that full-circle moment is something I treasure'

The biggest takeaway, when I think about it, is that I didn't pick this, it picked me. It feels like I was called to do this. Each moment over the last twenty years feels like a critical piece of the puzzle – and I treated it all as such. I can't help but feel that deep down, I've always known that all of this has always been about bringing these lessons back to you.

Note: Any successes described above were never about me. It is about the principles you're about to discover in this book. They were, and always will be, the differentiating factor.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- I'm a Peak Performance Expert. My role? Aligning the individuals or organisations with the principles to which this book is dedicated- to maximise performance.
- I have always been fixated on this question: Why? Why do certain individuals excel at the highest level? And most significantly: Is excellence a realistic option for us all?
- The University of Edinburgh had answers. We know how excellence emerges, why certain individuals and organisations excel, and the science that drives the mechanics of this process.
- After five years of studying, I needed to test the principles and myself:
 - Undertaking a grueling selection process enabled me to see firsthand how elite organisations select, develop, and then pressure-test peak performers.
 - Here, I experienced what's possible when the human brain and body are placed under the right conditions. This completely shifted my perceptions of potential.
- I was itching to test the principles at scale and trading was the perfect petri dish:
 - Every day, you get a score. You delivered or you didn't.
 - Some of the smartest, hardest working people- to compete with and against.
 - A few years later, I was leading one of the most successful trading floors in London with risk-adjusted returns of over 3,000 percent. The principles worked here too, and at scale.

My Journey

- Now, some of the most elite performers on the planet call me when the stakes are highest, and they need solutions. That full circle moment is something I treasure. I swear I must be the luckiest guy alive to be able to collaborate with such incredible performers.