



Mental Conditioning and SEAL Team Six

Recent events in Pakistan have put a new spotlight on SEAL Team Six, the legendary fighting force that is still 'unacknowledged' by the U.S. government.

Via the [New York Times](#):

By coincidence there are two new memoirs by former Seals members: "Seal Team Six" by Howard E. Wasdin, a Team 6 member who was seriously wounded in the battle of Mogadishu in 1993; and "The Heart and the Fist" by Eric Greitens, a former Rhodes scholar who joined the Navy Seals in 2001 (and who was not a member of Seal Team 6).



A SEAL's business is intensely physical. As Wasdin writes, "One night a SEAL might have to exit a submerged submarine, hang on for dear life as his Zodiac jumps over waves, scale a cliff, hump through enemy territory to his objective, scale a three-story building, do his deed, and get the hell out."

And yet, in the quest to become a SEAL, physical prowess is NOT what separates those who make it from those who don't. This counterintuitive truth runs parallel to trading.

As Eric Greitens writes ([excerpted in the WSJ](#)):

What kind of man makes it through Hell Week? That's hard to say. But I do know—generally—who won't make it. There are a dozen types that fail: the weight-lifting meatheads who think that the size of their biceps is an indication of their strength, the kids covered in tattoos announcing to the world how tough they are, the preening leaders who don't want to get dirty, and the look-at-me former athletes who have always been told they are stars but have never have been pushed beyond the envelope of their talent to the core of their character. In short, those who fail are the ones who focus on show. The vicious beauty of Hell Week is that you either survive or fail, you endure or you quit, you do—or you do not.

Some men who seemed impossibly weak at the beginning of SEAL training—men who puked on runs and had trouble with pull-ups—made it. Some men who were skinny and short and whose teeth chattered just looking at the ocean also made it. Some men who were visibly afraid, sometimes to the point of shaking, made it too.

Odd when you think about it.

Among your typical group of Hell Week attendees, there may actually be a negative correlation between outward appearance — the type of guy a Hollywood movie producer would pick as the all-conquering hero — and actual likelihood of success.

Howard Wasdin [says much the same](#). On sizing up his SEAL entry class:

A number of my remaining classmates were impressive: an Iron Man triathlete, a college football player, and others. One evening in the barracks, I looked at myself in the mirror. These guys are like race horses.

What the hell am I doing here?



And then, later on, as the hotshots began washing out:

A number of the race horses were the biggest crybabies. They'd probably been No. 1 much of their lives, and now when they had their first taste of adversity—BUD/S style—they couldn't handle it.

What the hell is wrong with these prima donnas?

Wasdin also has very clear opinions on what brings a trainee through — and again, it has little to do with traditional measures of prowess:

Deprived of support in our environment and the support of our own bodies, the only thing propping us up was our belief in accomplishing the mission—complete Hell Week. In psychology this belief is called self-efficacy. Even when the mission seems impossible, it is the strength of our belief that makes success possible. The absence of this belief guarantees failure. A strong belief in the mission fuels our ability to focus, put forth effort, and persist. Believing allows us to see the goal (complete Hell Week) and break the goal down into more manageable objectives (one evolution at a time). If the evolution is a boat race, it can be broken down into even smaller objectives such as paddling. Believing allows us to seek out strategies to accomplish the objectives, such as using the larger shoulder muscles to paddle rather than the smaller forearm muscles. Then, when the race is done, move on to the next evolution. Thinking too much about what happened and what is about to happen will wear you down. Live in the moment and take it one step at a time.

The mind is a far more potent weapon than a machine gun, a martial arts technique, or anything else. Beyond the basic requirements of rude physical health — having the ability to step up in the first place — *mental conditioning* is what enabled a small handful of cognitive warriors to power on through where others failed.

The irony here is, those who came to Hell Week with a sense of reliance on physical gifts may actually have been at a *disadvantage* relative to those who considered themselves underdogs:

- The top-conditioned athlete might rely on his superiority as a physical specimen — and thus get caught by surprise when it's his mind or his will that breaks.
- The “tough guy” or the “badass” might lean on the perception that he can handle anything — not realizing this glorified self-image is actually brittle and susceptible to shattering.
- The competitor who can step aside from his ego, however — who embraces the role of underdog and says “I'm going to give this everything I've got,” meaning it with every fiber of his being — has a better shot at reaching down and finding fortitude he didn't know was there. Lacking some superficial peg of pride or accomplishment to hang onto, he reaches deep inside himself... and finds the strength to come through.

Of the thousand or so men who seek to become SEALs each year, only 200 – 250 make it through the gauntlet (according to the [SEAL website](#)). That puts the washout rate around 75-80% — or realistically even higher, when you consider those who fail earlier in the process.

Why does that stat range look familiar?

Probably because it approximates the failure rate for those who attempt to become [consistently profitable poker players](#) – or consistently profitable traders. “Many are called but few are chosen.” A lot of guys come in full of piss and vinegar, but ultimately ring the bell and go home.



Look, trading is not for sissies. If you believe that stuff about how trading can be “super-duper easy” with the help of a magic system, some grizzled professional is going to punch you in the wallet and leave you turtled up on a corner of the mat.

There will always be hard challenges, even when you have a great system / great methodology and are doing everything right. The spoils of victory are reserved for those who can handle adversity. (Nothing wrong with the “turtled up” experience early on, of course — multiple times even — as long as it doesn’t become an excuse to quit.)

Something else interesting about SEALs: They are fierce optimists. Wasdin again:

A SEAL’s belief in accomplishing the mission transcends environmental or physical obstacles that threaten to make him fail. Often we think we’re indestructible. Forever the optimists, even when we’re outnumbered and outgunned, we still tend to think we have a chance to make it out alive—and be home in time for dinner.

This is particularly noteworthy because of a paradox: Optimism can be dangerous.

- Fierce optimism — an ability to foresee “carrying out the mission” at all costs — is clearly a vital mental asset.
- And yet, at the same time, untempered or inexperienced optimism is a terrible liability.

When hard times hit, sunny-side optimists are notorious for “dying of a broken heart.”

The tendency to “always look on the bright side,” even to the point of irrational extremes, can be a brittle shield against the slings and arrows of adversity. Trouble being, if the shield breaks — if the optimism facade cracks — the death blow follows. Hyper-optimistic people run the risk of being crushed when their go-to coping mechanism crumples.

Unprepared optimism can also court disaster. Think here of the entrepreneur (or the new trader) who has no real idea of what “risk management” means, or the magnitude of the challenge he is taking on, and decides to just “wing it” with funds he can’t afford to lose.

There is a massive difference between experimenting on an acceptably small level, gaining experience and knowledge through limited range mistakes, versus jumping into a shark pit with the rent money in your back pocket. Taking a knife to a gun fight isn’t brave, it’s just dumb. In similar form, taking on exposure to huge risks without vetting or understanding those risks is a recipe for catastrophic failure.

How do the SEALs counter these potential weaknesses? How did Wasdin and others make their fierce optimism work for them?

Four words: **Extensive training and preparation.** The SEAL earns the right to be confident by double and triple-checking every aspect of the plan — and training to the fullest extent possible.

As Richard Marcinko (the first Commanding Officer of Seal Team Six) writes:

“We all knew there was just one way to improve our odds for survival: train, train, train. Sometimes, if your training is properly intense it will kill you. More often — much, much more often — it will save your life.”



What summary lessons, then, can we draw from all this as traders? Here's a stab:

- **Mental conditioning is more important than physical.** *While trading is not a physical endeavor, there are certain “crutches” the trader might be tempted to rely on: Having a large capital base, Ivy League connections, a track record of success in some unrelated field, and so on. Embracing mental conditioning means getting your head in the right place; that in turn means recognizing anything pride or ego related could be a “false prop” — a rubber crutch that gives way on you at the worst possible time. In times of challenge and adversity, there is no substitute for putting ego aside and truly digging down deep.*
- **Transcend fear and focus on the present moment.** *A keen sense of awareness is key: To that end, ego and anxiety are distractions, just as temporary pain and discomfort are distractions. Focus on the mission. Focus on the mission. And get granular in your focus — dial in to the present moment, to the minor “evolutions” and small steps you can be taking to execute on the task at hand. Clear your mind of superficial concerns and take it one step at a time.*
- **Cultivate a fierce optimism.** *If you truly believe in yourself, there is at least a fighting chance — and maybe even a damn good chance — that you will actually succeed. If you do NOT believe in yourself, however, you are virtually guaranteed to fail. The wall of challenge and commitment is simply too high for the half-committed self-doubter to scale. Don't be a “pie in the sky” optimist, though. Understand that “what can go wrong, probably will go wrong” — and then learn to “eat setbacks for breakfast.” Earn the right to have supreme confidence in yourself, via a relentless focus on thorough preparation, deep training, and flawless execution of a well-crafted plan.*

HOOYAH!

JS

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