

DEATH GROUND STRATEGY

The Man in the Arena



LEVI CLAMPITT

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

- Theodore Roosevelt, *The Man in the Arena*, 1910

Intro

Soldiers fear death and injury, and as a result, they might flee the fight. The Death Ground Strategy uses cliffs, oceans, or other inescapable terrain to prevent this. Your fears might be more in your head, but the solution will remain the same. To hold yourself accountable and face your greatest weaknesses, you must construct your own metaphorical coliseum. You must build a system that cannot be gamed, a cage you cannot escape, a ring where you have to fight.

In your own Hero's Journey, you will face a mountain of setbacks. Your face will get bloodied, and you will want to go home. Your bad habits will kick in, and you'll try to wiggle out of your commitments. By building a system with limited escape routes, this is how you stay on the path long enough to become the Man in the Arena.

The Man in the Arena

Our default mode, especially in times of good, is to become soft and lazy. We are programmed for “easy” and to follow the path of least resistance. If we don’t do anything about this inherent weakness, we’ll get fatter and dumber with time. No one is immune. Just look at what happens to pro athletes after their arena is removed, or how quickly people are outsourcing their brain to AI these days. We are all corruptible.

To combat this natural weakness, we’ll need to build hard things into our lives again. We’ll need to take the stairs over the elevator, both literally and metaphorically.

Theodore Roosevelt called this “The Strenuous Life”. After being born a sickly, asthmatic child, doctors told young Teddy that he would need to take it easy for the rest of his life. Rather than follow that advice, he picked up boxing, became an avid outdoorsman and explorer, and led troops into battle. He had the money, fame, and resources to take it easy, especially after his presidency, and instead he chose to do hard things. Even at the ripe age of 55, Roosevelt spent five months exploring uncharted territory in the Amazon, fighting off deadly infection and losing sixty pounds in the process. He was the Man in the Arena.

Reading books or listening to podcasts on doing hard things can be motivating, but this will only take us so far. To get to where we want to go, we'll need to create a system to hold us accountable after the caffeine has worn off and we no longer want to get after it. Gladiators or boxers could not "wing it" and instead had to abide by the rules of the system. The same will be true for us. To succeed in our arena, we must do the following:

1. Incentivize the right actions
2. Develop a code of honor
3. Create rules to stay on the path

This is how we ensure we not only do the hard things, but also the right things.

Now, if the system is scammable and there are no consequences for breaking the rules, it will probably be scammed. If your work doesn't require a doctor's note, more people will call in sick. And if there is no incentive for doing great work, fewer people will aim higher. The same goes for your own personal goals and projects. If we can wiggle out of responsibility when we are not feeling up to it, you and I will probably attempt to under the right circumstances.

Here's how we can change that.

The Incentives

Incentives help us do the right thing, especially in the face of fear, pain, or discomfort. If you can get these right, you can probably do anything you put your mind to, but this won't be easy.

I was a personal trainer for 10 years, and one thing I noticed early on in my career is that people's incentives suck. When I would first meet with someone, I would discover that they just wanted to look good (which everyone can relate to). The problem here is that “looking good,” as a goal, just takes way too long to come to fruition. As a result, most people would get bored and ditch exercising for more entertaining short-term pursuits. It's just a poor incentive.

To keep us interested, we need something right now to work toward, something either achievable today, this week, or this month. The more reasons you can add to the short and middle-term, the more fixated you will be on that thing (which is where we want to be), and the more likely we'll be able to resist other short-term distractions. In the world of fake dopamine outlets, you have to find those reasons to do the right thing.

So you take this “looking good” incentive for working out and you add to it a myriad of differing performance and well-being goals, both process and outcome, which will fill out our short-term and middle-term incentives. This one big goal (such as “6 pack abs”) now becomes 17 other smaller goals, such as:

- Meal prep 5 days a week
- Sign up for a race
- Join a yoga class
- Build a home gym
- Set a record for max pull-ups
- Use a sauna 3x a month
- Etc.

These are your carrots. For fitness and other pursuits, you will need to place a garden of carrots along your path to act as incentives.

For lasting success, we must create incentives that lead from one thing to the next. If you sign up for one big race, such as a marathon, that’s awesome but it probably won’t be enough. You’ll also need to sign up for a “warm-up” race before it (to help with your nerves) and another “cool-down” event after the race (to ensure you keep up your motivation). You may also need to sign up for yoga to make sure you aren’t all jacked up, hire a running coach or

join a running group, lift weights at some point, and do all these other things just to ensure you make it to the starting line.

The goal with all this is to make it harder to quit. If you only have one big race signed up for it's a lot easier to say forget this. But now if you have eight other commitments (in classes, races or events, friends, coaches, and other financial purchases), it hurts a lot more to our ego and self-image to back out. I.e., we now have a lot of incentives not to quit.

The other perk of this strategy is that it also keeps things interesting. Although training for a big race is much easier than training for "looking good," it can still be a slog. Your mind craves variation, and so does your body. Adding in additional monthly side quests and cross-training prevents it from becoming boring. This can include hiking, cycling, swimming, hunting, boxing, gymnastics, or anything else that gets your body moving.

This method should be applied to everything. If writing a book is your goal (a massive long-term endeavor), we must think about how we can break it down into manageable short-term objectives as well as how we can create commitments that hurt to back out of. For the Death Ground Strategy to work, your ego must be on the line.

Takeaway

Quitting one thing always hurts but quitting and failing at twenty things can be catastrophic to our self-image. Take advantage of this. If this thing is important, always expand it and invite other people to watch your progress. These are your incentives.

The Code of Honor

Incentives by themselves will only take us so far. If you can wiggle out of something, you'll probably try, and without a code of honor to keep you strong, you may quit as the going gets tough.

Our values are our backbone. They provide strength and clarity during difficult times and guide us on how to respond to challenges. Every fighting force on the planet has their own code because they realized long ago that these values – these ideas – are more powerful than any one military strategy or weapon they could produce.

The samurai had [Bushido](#), Stoics had the four cardinal virtues, and present-day Marines have “Honor, Courage, and Commitment”.

These moral codes work because they turn morality into identity and fuse who you are with what you do. When you go against the code, you become lost. You are no longer a Marine, a Sikh, or whatever group you once chose to identify with. In the context of the Death Ground Strategy, you experience a social death. Shame and exile likely follow next.

Our code of honor is our backstop against quitting. Once everything has broken and nothing is going as planned, this code will be your last line of defense. The more you identify with your code and its values, the more you will be able to resist and persist.

The following Death Ground values will help you get started with your own code:

- 1. Integrity**
- 2. Courage**
- 3. Perseverance**

It's going to suck, and you are going to be scared, so you'll need courage. You are going to fail and get knocked

down, so you'll need perseverance to get back up. And you'll need integrity because you said you were going to do it – and besides, it's the right thing to do.

Others that may help:

4. **Ownership**
5. **Adaptability**
6. **Growth**
7. **Duty**
8. **Discipline**
9. **Curiosity**
10. **Humility**
11. **Service and Community**
12. **Loyalty**
13. **Family**
14. **Compassion and Respect**
15. **Justice**

Taking ownership will be crucial here, as there won't be a white knight in shining armor riding in to show you the way. It's all on you. It's your goals, it's your code, and it's your arena. No one is going to set the ridiculously high standards that you need to reach except for you.

To help with this process, think about the person of character you need to become to achieve your objectives.

What are their values, how do they act, and why do they do what they do? For inspiration, read, watch, and listen. History is replete with high-character people of all creeds and backgrounds. Implement what you find and become that person. To take this further, read [*The Alter Ego Effect*](#) by Todd Herman.

In the end, you are the hero of your own journey. If you don't pay attention, however, you may just become the villain. Figure out your code.

Takeaway

The greatest weapon at our disposal is our identity and values. Define who you are, sharpen what you stand for, and then use it to take on life's obstacles. Failure to do this may lead to wiggling out of anything that's hard.

The Rules

Rules are needed to help align our daily actions with our goals. Life is chaotic and you are going to forget what you are trying to achieve. Subconsciously, you'll also look for reasons not to do the work. We live in a world of infinite

distraction, so we'll need to develop rules and strategies to navigate this.

The two areas we'll need to focus on the most:

1. Quieting distractions
2. Amplifying purpose

Here are some rules on those.

Quieting Distractions

The biggest distraction we face today is our mobile phone. If social media and news is crack, your smartphone is the crack pipe. I envision someday we will all look down upon this like we do with smoking, but we are not there yet. So how can we make it less powerful?

Pick and choose from the following:

1. Do not use your phone within 60 minutes of waking up or before bed.
2. Choose whole days to go without your phone (the weekend is a good time to bury it in a desk).
3. Do not use your phone in bed or other designated "dead zones."

4. Block all notifications.
5. Uninstall browsers and use your desktop computer (or ChatGPT) for any searches you need to do.
6. Uninstall the "crack" (TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Candy Crush, etc.).
7. Install the [Minimalist Phone App](#) (my go-to).
8. Bonus: Do not use it in front of impressionable minds (children, colleagues).

Related, some of us will be distracted by our TV (news, streaming platforms, or video games). I'm one of them. If you are unable to take an axe to your plasma screen, here is what I suggest:

1. Do not watch TV before a certain time, such as 7 p.m.
2. Pick one night a week for "Movie Night", video games, or news, and just stick to it.
3. Cancel all paid streaming platforms
4. Watch with intent (such as documentaries on YouTube).

A big source of distraction for a lot of people will be drugs (alcohol, weed, nicotine, and even caffeine), which will have a compounding effect on screen time. These substances all muddy our thinking. I mentioned my alcohol rule before, which is to never consume it by myself. This has cut down my drinking by over 95%. I used to enjoy

having a drink after work to take the edge off, but that was the beer talking. It doesn't help and besides, you'll need that edge sharp.

I've also struggled with abusing coffee for much of my adult life, which doesn't sound like a bad thing on the surface – until you are able to wean yourself off. Then you realize how much it contributes to your overall anxiety and lack of clarity. My coffee rule is simple: one cup MAX in the morning (best paired with a workout). If I don't set boundaries here, I will drink it all day long, substituting it for meals. Not good.

The goal with a lot of these rules is to cut down on all the fake dopamine surges we receive from our devices, content, and drugs. Then, replace them with the real thing (aka achievement).

Amplifying Purpose

After all the distractions are quieted, we must turn up the volume of what we are trying to accomplish here. For this to work, it needs to be seen, heard, and felt.

We are highly influenceable and programmable creatures. To take advantage of that, we'll need to treat ourselves like

the big corporations and brand experts already do – which is to say, you need to spam yourself. In marketing, they say a person needs to see a message 7 times before it leaves an impression. You'll need to see your messages much more often, especially if you don't really believe in them yet.

The steps:

1. Brainstorm

- Write out all your goals and aspirations of things you are trying to achieve (your incentives)
- Consider the person of character you need to become to be able to face your fears and win
- Create your code of honor and/or rules for living
- Develop a plan of action

2. Keep them Visible

- Post these messages on your wall, whiteboards, screensaver, work locker, and everywhere else you can

3. Do The Things

- Start acting on your plan: register for classes, find mentors, plan events, etc.

- Track your progress daily, weekly, and monthly
- Adjust accordingly (because you will fail a lot)

4. Brainwash Yourself

- Read the books
- Listen to the podcasts
- Find the mentors

This last one is crucial. Your thoughts suck, and you cannot depend on them. You are probably not the Man in the Arena (yet) so you will need to study the people who are and have been there.

Now not all your thoughts suck, just the ones that are limiting you. This is why we read, so we can inject someone else's thoughts into our head. That's what's happening right now as you read this. I'm in your head. You'll need this approach to rewire any of your negative feedback loops. To do this, find the people who overcame your anxieties, fears, and other obstacles, and then adopt their thought patterns. If it works for cult leaders, it will work for you.

We must also realize that it is called “stream of consciousness” for a reason. There is a lot of random stuff that floats through our brain, which isn't necessarily “us,”

but it is up to us which stuff we grab onto and identify with. Own the good, disown the bad, and start flooding the river with positive inputs again.

We tend to think of brainwashing in only negative terms and that it only occurs in secret government programs – but it happens everywhere, all the time. For instance, we are all getting re-educated right now through the algorithm. I don't know your online habits, but I bet you are being shown something over and over in your feed. Is this “propaganda” positive and productive for your goals? If not, torch it.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a real thing. Whatever you are looking for, you'll find it. If you want to find reasons why something is not possible, you'll find that too. But why do that to yourself? It may feel good because now you no longer need to do the work but the work is where the magic happens. So go find the reasons.

Takeaway

Are you the Man in the Arena or the man on his phone? Remove the distractions and take control of your algorithm. Your mind is yours to brainwash, so make sure you are doing it in a positive manner.

Conclusion

Putting yourself in the arena is not hard. Staying there is. This – perseverance – will be the key for almost any endeavor. To get where you need to go, you'll need to build a routine that keeps your butt in the seat and helps you withstand all the chaos of life. If you can do this, and on a long enough time scale, you'll win. You'll become the Man in the Arena.

Thanks for reading.

Levi Clampitt

PS - For more on this idea, [subscribe](#).