

THE EVERYDAY ATHLETE

**HOW TO BALANCE WORK,
FAMILY, and FITNESS FOR LIFE**

Art Trapotsis

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CHAPTER 1

FINDING YOUR WAY TO A BALANCED LIFE

I'm glued to the wheel six inches in front of my bike; it belongs to my friend, Dan. Twenty-four miles per hour, 156 beats per minute. Damn, this feels good! Behind me are three other riders in a tight paceline. We're in the last half of a warm and humid twenty-three-mile ride in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

After this ride is finished, I have to get the kids off to school and then attend a day of sales meetings. I'm looking forward to coaching my seven-year-old's basketball practice in the evening, followed by a quick dinner with my family and then the usual bedtime routine with my children.

Life is good.

Everyone talks about “work-life balance.” Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written on this topic. From my

experience, and from the interviews I conducted for this book, fitness is the key to achieving this balance. I want to take you on a journey into how people balance work, family, and fitness and share some insights and best practices on this important topic. In short, fitness needs to be placed on a nearly equal footing (not from a time perspective, but from a priority perspective) with work and family. Envision it as the third leg in the three-legged stool of life.

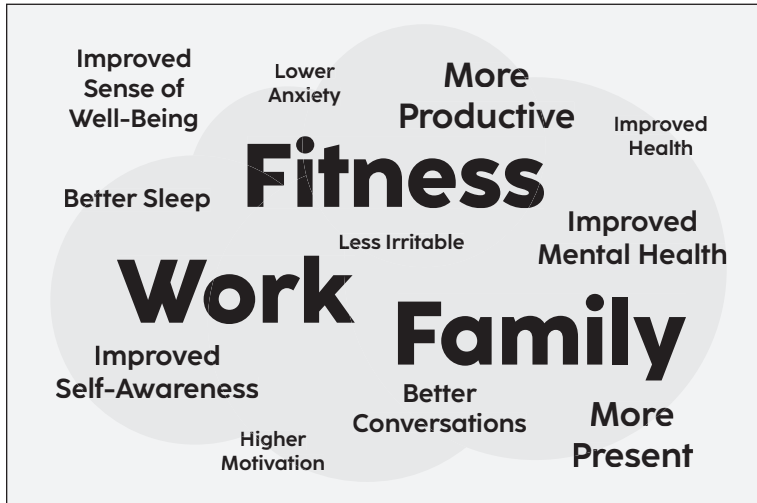
While some experts say that balance is the key to success and happiness, others say that balance is impossible. Indeed, balance comes and goes throughout life; sometimes work takes over our lives, sometimes it's family, and sometimes training for an athletic event saps all your energy. My approach to feeling a greater sense of balance in life is simple: (1) take the long view and (2) incorporate fitness into your life.

Right off the bat you might be thinking, *If only I had time*. I know . . . I feel that way too, and I felt it even more when my kids were younger—they're both teenagers now. But you probably do have the time, and I can help you identify those windows of opportunity. Anything is possible. You can think differently about your day, and you can think differently about fitness and physical activity.

We all know how important fitness is for our lives. We've seen countless headlines on how regular exercise can make us healthier and lower our blood pressure, cholesterol, and weight while building strong muscles. The benefits are immeasurable and undeniable.

But fitness isn't just about being in good shape—it goes far beyond that into how it makes us feel in all parts of our lives. How? Fitness includes our physical *and* mental health; therefore, it affects everything from how we work at our jobs and interact with our friends and families to how we think and feel about ourselves. Fitness includes our moods and sleep patterns, how and what we eat, and how we get along with our

spouses, kids, and bosses. When fitness is in harmony with everything else in our lives, we feel healthier and better in every possible way.



This image illustrates how work, family, and fitness exist together in an amorphous and fluid amoeba-like shape (i.e., your life). Notice that it is not a perfect circle. There will be times when the shape gets stretched a bit more in one direction (e.g., work deadlines are consuming your time) than the others. The point is that the other categories (fitness and family) never completely leave the structure but are always present. No matter how time-consuming work or family obligations become, you can always carve time out for yourself and fitness. If you do this, you will reap some or all of the benefits of living a balanced life.

So, if we know how important fitness benefits are to helping us live longer and happier, why is it so difficult for us to incorporate them into our lives? If fitness is so good for us, why does it constantly fall out of our routines? What's missing? Quite simply, we don't give it the priority it deserves, nor do we realize its far-reaching effects on both our daily lives and our long-term health.

This book is about finding balance and nurturing and developing an athletic mindset. When we have balance in our

lives, we're able to devote the right amount of time to our work, our families, our friends, and our fitness—whatever that may be for each individual at any given point in time. Those requirements will change, so it's up to each of you to figure out when you're feeling out of balance and adjust accordingly. Just remember that prioritizing fitness and thinking like an athlete, no matter where you are in life, provides that pathway forward: balance requires fitness, and fitness leads to balance.

Keep this in mind: if you've had trouble making fitness a regular part of your life, or if you're not focusing on fitness at all right now, that doesn't mean you're faulty in some way. Far from it. The demands of our lives will always militate against our ability to make time for fitness. But there can be consequences when we don't make fitness a part of what we do during the course of the week. These consequences are far-reaching and can affect not just our long-term health but also our performance at work, how we communicate with our loved ones, and how we respond to the stressful situations that arise every day.

Indian yogi and author Sadhguru, founder of the non-profit spiritual organization Isha Foundation, says, "There is no such thing as work-life balance—it is all life. The balance has to be within you." In order to find balance, we have to want it and make time for it, even when our lives turn chaotic. This sense of balance is so important because it helps us find tranquility, both mentally and physically, when times get tough. In short, if you find and create the right balance between your work, your family, and your fitness, you will be able to take on most challenges that life throws at you.

We all struggle to incorporate fitness into our demanding lives—it's hard for me too. Why? Because we're busy with a million things—building our careers, taking care of our families, trying to stay in touch with friends, keeping our marriages on

track, and so forth. In the midst of all these imperatives, even trying to find thirty minutes for exercise can feel daunting.

But here's a secret: it is not only possible to live a balanced life; it's necessary for your happiness.

I'm an athlete myself, and also the founder and president of Keep It Tight Athletics, a nonprofit fitness-lifestyle organization based out of Boston. I engage with athletes at all levels and stages of their lives. I realized many years ago that some of them had figured out how to achieve this sense of balance, even when they appeared to have a full plate.

So how do they do it? And how can you do it too? In this book, I'll give you tips you can use and steps you can take to achieve a more balanced lifestyle. I've interviewed over a hundred athletes, and I'll share their strategies as well as my own experience in order to guide you to achieving greater balance, even amid chaos.

This book is for everyone, from young adults starting their first jobs and families to weekend warriors and masters athletes—and anyone in between.

INCORPORATING FITNESS INTO LIFE

Depending on what stage of life you are in with career, family, and health, the time you have for exercise will vary. No matter what stage you're in, when your time gets crunched, exercise is typically one of the first things that falls away. Why? It just seems less important when compared with the demands of work and family. It makes sense: we can't lose our jobs because we need to pay our bills, keep a roof over our heads, and put food on the table for our families. When we're using our limited time and energy to juggle friends, family, and work, we tell ourselves, *I'll get back to fitness later, when I have more time.* And then fitness stops being a priority.

We need to weave fitness into our daily work and family calendars. If we start working out and then stop for a few weeks, it affects our stress and cortisol levels, and that in turn affects *everything* in our lives—including work and family.

When I was younger, I was very focused on my career, but I always found time to break away at lunch or after work to do what I called an “hour of power” on my bike. I did this because I enjoyed competing in mountain-bike races or triathlons on the weekend and I was trying to stay in shape as best I could. I knew I couldn’t get in a full-volume training week (ten-plus hours), but that one hour would be enough to get me by and still allow me to have fun. I did these one-hour sessions three to four times per week, even with everything else that was going on in my life.

I also had a fear-based motivation in the back of my mind: my dad has a history of heart disease, which could be hereditary. That fear motivates me to this day to keep fitness in my life.

So I had fear and competition to keep me going. Here was a third reason: mitigating stress. Over the years, when I would visit my dad during his stays in the hospital, I would make a habit of bringing my running shoes. Why did I do that? If I was going to be visiting for six or eight hours that day, I didn’t want to stay inside the hospital the whole time. So when my dad was resting, I put on the shoes and I headed outside to bang out a run. All I was trying to do was find some inner peace amid the anxiety of the situation. And you know what? It helped.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL TEACH YOU

In this book, I’ll show you how to maintain a balanced life even when you’re overburdened by your day-to-day responsibilities. In these pages we’ll discuss internal motivation, time

management, and making fitness and “athleticism” about more than just exercise. This book will show you:

- How to get or stay fit while juggling work and family
- Why fitness is the key ingredient to finding balance
- Why balance is important
- How to balance work, family, and fitness at any stage in life
- How to incorporate fitness into your mindset and life by
 - getting motivated,
 - getting over the “guilt” of making time for fitness, and
 - being flexible with your schedule
- How to be aware of your Crabbiness Index
- How to partner with your family
- How to get your boss on board
- Sample schedules for incorporating fitness into your day, week, month, and year

FITNESS CHALLENGES FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE

Let’s take a look at some of the groups of people who will benefit from this book—people who are struggling with the core problem of trying to get fit while dealing with the complexities and busyness of life. Folks such as former athletes, current athletes, future athletes, and those of you who would never think of yourself as an athlete, including:

- People in their first jobs or early stages of their careers

- People who are starting families or who have young children
- Weekend warriors
- Masters athletes

What are the biggest issues for all these groups? Time management and motivation. No matter your age or what challenges you face, it's never too late to include fitness in your life or to take your fitness to the next level. The groups presented below are just general categories for folks to identify with. The list is certainly not exhaustive, and people could overlap in certain categories.

PEOPLE IN THEIR FIRST JOBS OR EARLY STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS

Why do folks who are starting out their careers find it so hard to get to the gym after work? The biggest reason is that they're trying to prove themselves to their bosses by staying late at work. They're at the office from morning until evening, and then they have to commute home, go to the grocery store, cook dinner, do their laundry, and still find time to rest. They might be on their own for the first time in their lives, and all this change is a huge adjustment. That means that their gym membership goes unused and they work out less and less until it drops off completely. Getting established in your career is a natural progression and an expected priority in your twenties and thirties. It's appropriate that you are putting a lot of energy into your work, but to what end? Be sure to balance your work commitments with your emotional and physical well-being by maintaining some kind of fitness regime.

One of my employees is experiencing just such a situation. He's an engineer in his twenties, and his commute to our office

is forty-five minutes to an hour each way, which adds so much time to his day that he can't seem to carve out time for fitness. But his problem is not time management, it's motivation. When he was in college, he was a wrestler, always training for his next match. But now that he's in the world outside college and doesn't have this regular competition to motivate him, he has no real target or goal for his fitness.

This kind of situation is common for people in their twenties. Motivation for exercise can be hard to come by for people early in their careers, especially when their experience of fitness in the past involved a team or competitive sport, both of which provide social motivators and external rewards.

PEOPLE WHO ARE STARTING FAMILIES OR WHO HAVE YOUNG CHILDREN

At a certain point in our lives, some people get married, start families, advance in their careers, and consider becoming homeowners for the first time. Their numerous duties include daily activities such as taking out the trash, helping out with housecleaning, playing with the kids, putting the kids to bed, and many, many after-work activities and errands. It's a rewarding period in your life, but it can also be demanding and exhausting.

There are several people at this stage in my company, and they're all facing these challenges now. Some used to be squash and tennis players, and others played soccer and basketball, until they stopped doing these activities entirely when the demands of life began encroaching on their free time. Others have never really exercised in their lives and have begun to realize they should . . . but struggle to find the time or energy to start.

This stage is arguably the toughest time in life to balance work, family, and fitness. Motivation can be very low due to

career and family pressures. As a result, time-management skills are put to the test. But even with these new life responsibilities, this group can benefit tremendously from taking some steps to achieve a balanced lifestyle.

WEEKEND WARRIORS

Weekend warriors are people who don't exercise during the week much at all, but then challenge themselves in some physical way over the weekend. Some of them might love to compete and test their fitness by entering the occasional 5K, marathon, Spartan Race, or charity ride on the weekends. They're called weekend warriors because the weekend is the only time when they can enter events—such are the burdens of work and family life. While their time-management skills and motivation for fitness are generally good, they can still find it challenging to get in all the training hours they need each week.

Weekend warriors are trying to find balance through a bit of a binge approach. They work hard during the week and then play hard on the weekend. It works for a lot of people. The only real downside is the risk of injury. Without consistent training, the body lacks support for a sudden, marked increase in activity on the weekends. On top of that, some folks might overextend in terms of the weekend activity's time commitment and, therefore, throw any sense of balance out the window.

When my kids were young, I was stressed about getting them to eat vegetables every day so that they would establish healthy eating habits. It was hard to get them on board with that plan. Our pediatrician suggested that we think about vegetable intake by the week as opposed to stressing about our kids eating vegetables at every meal or every day. So, we started framing vegetable consumption differently. We began to ask, "Did they get enough vegetables this week?" If they

missed eating vegetables at one dinner, but made up for it the next day, that was okay. Framing fitness or exercise in the same way might be helpful for some people. It's okay not to work out every day, but as long as each week includes enough exercise to balance out life's other stressors, that's good. However, with that said, weekend warriors might take this idea to the extreme. Finding a way to incorporate regular exercise, even if not every day, is preferable to binge-exercising once a week.

MASTERS ATHLETES

Masters athletes include people who were high school or college athletes, and later in life still have the desire to maintain their fitness levels and stay in particularly good shape. This category can also include people who fell in love with competing in a sport or activity later in life and take that sport very seriously. They usually train between six and twelve hours each week, as they did when they were in school. Training is just part of their routine; it's in their blood. This group comprises anyone over thirty-five or forty years of age who takes their training seriously. They're usually at the workload apex of both their careers *and* their family lives. And that means they might live their lives a little differently: Sleep is a priority, so they always make sure to get enough of it. Nutrition is also very important to them, and they have a regular strength-training routine.

The challenges that this group faces are similar to those that every group contends with—learning to be flexible with their family time and work schedules. These folks do have a greater challenge to find ways to fit in the additional demands of longer and possibly more-focused training sessions. And they have to get their workouts in where and when they can. If a masters athlete has a young child, for example, they'll try to

push aside the desire to rest when the toddler goes down for a nap and use that time to train so they can be ready to compete. Or that person might get up very early in the morning to squeeze in a workout before others awake.

Many masters athletes train well into their sixties and seventies. The biggest challenge for aging athletes is recovering from injuries or avoiding overuse stress. After a hard workout or event, they need to prioritize healing through rest. Even though they're still likely in the mindset of *When I have time available, I need to go work out*, they actually need to focus on resting their muscles rather than trying to push past the pain. The challenge for them is making that mental shift away from pushing themselves physically. It's about using that time that's already been carved out from the day to proactively focus on healing their bodies. I've often had to tell myself, *Take it easy: don't do anything today; just go for a light walk instead.*

THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE AND “KEEPING IT TIGHT”

Having a sense of balance means that at the end of the day, we have made time for the things that are really important to us. That sense of balance comes from finding the harmony between those day-to-day responsibilities and the things we enjoy that recharge our souls—attending a museum exhibit, getting a good night's sleep, hanging out with friends, or going for a run or a hike.

Another component of balance is feeling like we're contributing to something bigger than ourselves in society. That means that we keep learning and growing, especially at work. When we're doing well in our professions or personal growth projects, we're more likely to treat ourselves well, spend time with our family and friends, and have more restorative rest.

When we feel balanced, we can more effectively and calmly deal with the problems in our lives. Does the bathroom need cleaning? Are the kids at each other's throats? Did we forget to go to the grocery store? When we have balance, we can deal with everything and move on to the next thing. That balance that we feel is the equilibrium between our mental, physical, and emotional states.

In essence, that balance is not just work-family-fitness but also body-mind-soul. It's the ideal state of unity between what we *have* to do and what we *want* to do, between our daily duties and the activities that give us personal joy and rejuvenate us. For example, when I get in a morning workout, I feel more at peace, and that carries over to my family and my colleagues at the office. That enables me to roll with the punches better, personally and professionally, because my mind and spirit can now tolerate more stress. I feel recharged and ready to take on the world.

In the chapters that follow, you'll learn what a balanced lifestyle regimen looks like, how to find time for it, and how to get your partner (your spouse, husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, or life partner), boss, and kids on board with your goals. Everyone who struggles with the demands of a job and a family wants this balance, but most of us don't know how to get there. I'll show you how. I'm going to teach you how to "Keep It Tight."

What does that mean? To "Keep It Tight" is an expression we use in the cycling world for when you are perfectly drafting off the rider in front of you in a group ride, riding six inches off the wheel of that bike. Keeping that position and distance "tight" increases your performance and helps you to save energy while cycling. Over time, some friends and I transferred that expression from the cycling world into our regular lives. The phrase began to represent the ability to balance our

success at work and at home while still maintaining our fitness. And we concluded that maintaining our fitness can actually help fuel our success at work and at home, creating a nice balance. Further, achieving this balance allows us to bring into harmony our physical fitness, mental tranquility, and spiritual clarity—which is what I want for you.

Let's all learn how to "Keep It Tight"!