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John Kosner

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'The Right Call' Review: The Sheep From the GOATS

Sports stars and their coaches get candid about the habits and qualities that separate the elite from the journeymen jocks.

By Edward Kosner

Aug. 1, 2023 at 6:25 pm ET

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Tom Brady and Bill Belichick in 2018. PHOTO: MEDIANEWS GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

At the Beijing games of 2008, swimmer Michael Phelps was determined to break Mark Spitz's nearly four-decade-old record of seven gold medals in a single Olympics. For 20 years, Phelps had swum five miles of laps a day, six or seven days a week (including his birthday and Christmas), to condition his body and "automate" his form.

Throughout the 2006 NFL season, coach Tony Dungy's Indianapolis Colts, who played their home games in a domed stadium, routinely practiced snapping, passing and running with a soaking-wet football. Then, in the Super Bowl in Miami, they executed all their plays to beat the fumbling Chicago Bears in the driving rain.

Bill Belichick drilled his New England Patriots in the quick and proper way to hand the football to the ref after each play. Why? To save the seconds on the clock the team could lose if the zebra fumbled a toss from a Pats player.

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The Right Call: What Sports Teach Us About Work and Life

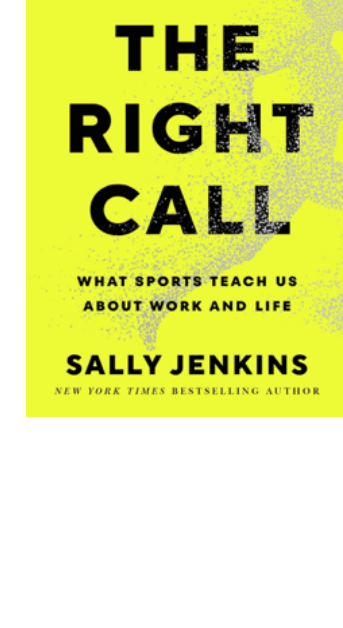
By Sally Jenkins

Gallery Books

272 pages

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These extraordinary glimpses of top performers and their coaches come from "The Right Call: What Sports Teach Us About Work and Life," a beguiling book by the sportswriter Sally Jenkins—daughter of the late all-star journalist and author Dan Jenkins—who has covered the Olympics, Super Bowls and other peak sports events for decades.

"The Right Call" is essentially a self-help book, but it's unlike any you may have encountered before. Sleek as a wide receiver racing toward the end zone, the book weighs in at barely

200 pages plus copious endnotes and an index. But it's packed with sophisticated reportage and epigrammatic insights that deliver on the promise of the subtitle.

Ms. Jenkins's thesis is simple: Leadership and performance, especially decision-making under pressure, can be enhanced by understanding and emulating the behavior of brilliant pro and college stars and their coaches, whose rigor and dedication can turn talented athletes into icons and mediocre teams into Super Bowl and NCAA champs. "These are the elements," she writes, "of a good process for anyone who wants to choose and act well in the face of extraordinary pressures: Conditioning, Practice, Discipline, Candor, Culture, Failure, Intention."

Successive chapters illustrate these aspects of performance and leadership with compelling examples from the careers of top coaches like Dungy, Belichick, Andy Reid of the Kansas City Chiefs, Steve Kerr of the Golden State Warriors and Pat Summitt of the Tennessee Lady Vols. And there's an all-star cast of athletes, too, including Phelps, all-pro quarterbacks Tom Brady and Peyton Manning, and Diana Nyad, who at age 64 swam from Havana to Key West—"the equivalent of five English Channels"—in 53 hours.

Ms. Jenkins deals with both psychology and physiology, noting, for example, that physical conditioning stimulates growth in the frontal lobes of the brain. Similarly, sustained brain-work under intense pressure can drain weight from the body as surely as strenuous exercise: In 1984-85, during his five-month contest with Garry Kasparov, chess champion Anatoly Karpov lost 22 pounds while sitting down.

The pages of "The Right Call" are studded with aperçus, many from Ms. Jenkins, others from athletes and coaches and from experts in the science of success and failure. "Practice differs from conditioning," writes the author; "it's strategic, informed, targeted work." "The difference between elites and amateurs is that elites practice those things they are worst at and dislike the most, while the rest of us run around our backhands our whole lives." "The secret of successful deciders is that they train themselves into a higher tolerance for tedium." "Pressure," says quarterback Manning, paraphrasing coach Chuck Noll, "is something that you feel when you don't know what the hell to do." "You are your numbers," says crusty coach Bill Parcells.

Ms. Jenkins illustrates her chapters on different elements of leadership with vivid examples from the careers of her jocks and sideline wizards: The morning after each season ended, Manning and his coach watched hours of tape, not of his touchdown passes but of every interception he threw. During the four failed Cuba-to-Florida swims before her 2013 triumph, Diana Nyad quit the water only when her trainer and "conscience," Bonnie Stoll, said OK, enough. NBA shooter Steph Curry has what Ms. Jenkins describes as the coarse, calloused "hands of a logger" from making 2,000 practice shots a week. When Steve Kerr was named coach of the Warriors, he flew around the country to meet every one of his new players in their homes.

Many consider Tom Brady the GOAT—the greatest pro quarterback of all time. But to win that distinction, Brady had to overcome with supreme dedication NFL draft evaluations that accurately described him as of "poor build," lacking "physical stature" and "a really strong arm." "Can't drive the ball down the field," said one scout. "Gets knocked down easily." Brady, in Ms. Jenkins's book, is a classic example of intentionality, "the conscious decision to work toward a self-crafted identity, to refuse to let events—or other people—decide who and what you will be."

Self-help books can be inspiring—or daunting. Authors give readers, in the words of one of my old bosses at Newsweek, "the arrows to Toyland." But following the practices of some of the paragons cited in "The Right Call" is likely to be beyond the capacity or will of most readers. And some of the recommended conduct—like scrupulous honesty with bosses, colleagues and subordinates—is right out of the Boy Scout handbook. Still, the sharp insights and intriguing anecdotes that fill the book prompt valuable reflection on one's own performance under pressure and track record of decision-making.

And it's a joy to read.

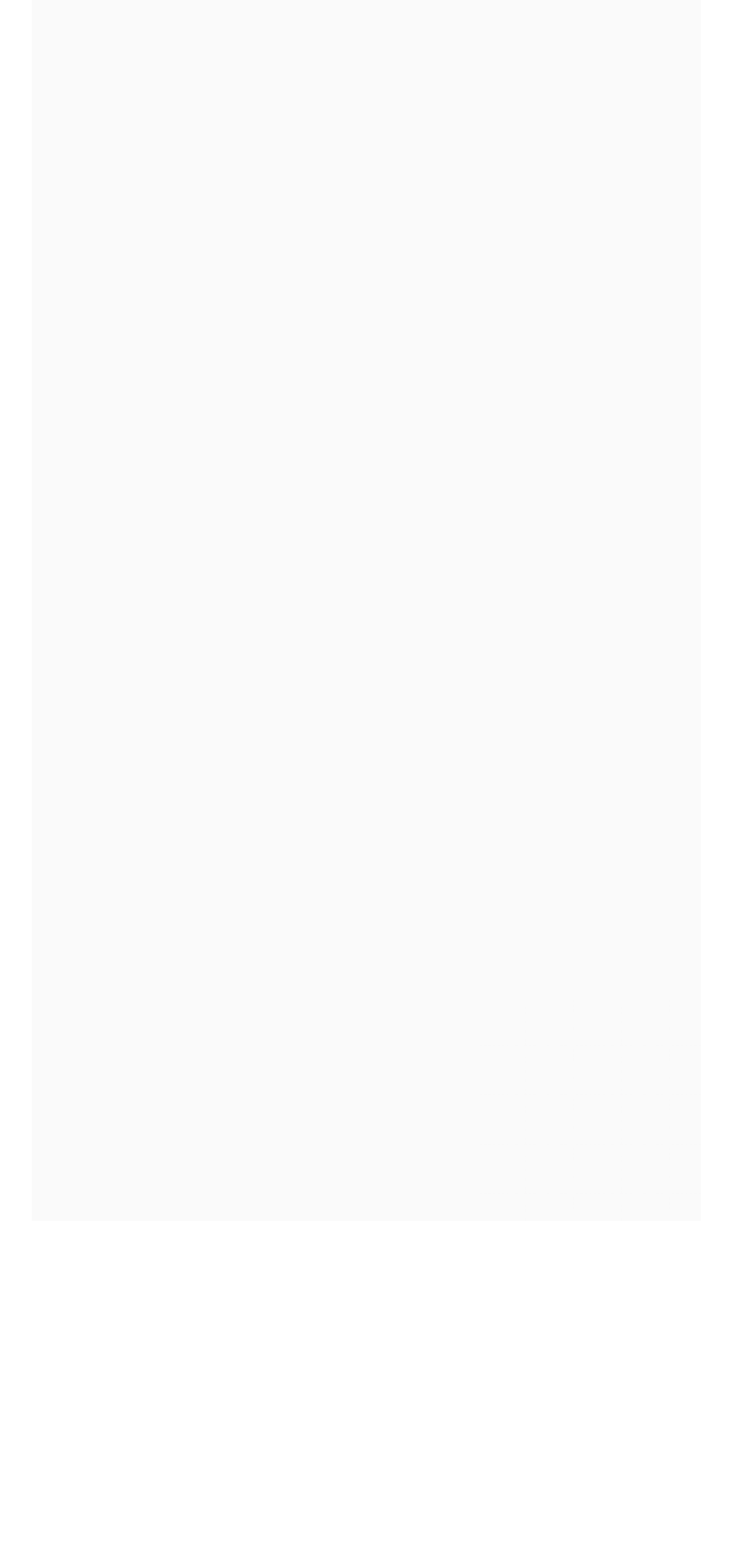
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Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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