

• The Rabbit Hole Jump In.



Introduction

Congratulations on graduating from Notre Dame, one of the nation's premier universities! This is impressive in itself, but you did it while also dedicating an unbelievable amount of time, energy, and focus towards successfully pursuing tennis. Not many people can handle all that so take a breath, enjoy it, and appreciate what an amazing accomplishment this is!

I'm sharing this essay shortly after your graduation because I think there are several key lessons that are relevant to student-athletes at this time in their lives. My hope is that by openly discussing them that I can provide some awareness and tools to help you better handle the difficult transition from college to "real life."

One of the main tools discussed is how improving your self-awareness can help you gain clarity and confidence in the direction you want to take your life. While this process of self-discovery never truly ends, beginning it will help illuminate your core values, making important decisions that much easier. This self-awareness is the foundation to help you create a meaningful, successful, and fulfilling life. At the end, all mastery is self-mastery, and it must begin with self-awareness.

Specifically, there are four key areas I think athletes need more coaching on:

- 1. The transition from student-athlete to the "real world"
- 2. How to think about time
- 3. What to look for in a job
- 4. The importance of coaches and mentors

However, before diving in, I want to stress a couple words of caution.

I don't enjoy being told how – or that – I should do something. I'm also uncomfortable handing out advice without having been asked for it. If I were in your shoes, I'd be skeptical and maybe even see this essay as arrogant. Though this may be the case, I've decided to go ahead anyway because I believe that my experiences – both successes and failures – might help you avoid some mistakes and clarify the process and mindset that have been helpful to me in striving to achieve life's true wealth – a meaningful, fulfilling, and balanced life surrounded by good company.

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While my advice is well-intentioned, be aware of Paul Graham's warning: "Advice is individual experience, wildly over-extrapolated" and this essay is full of my wild extrapolations. They may or may not resonate or be appropriate for you. Just like anything important in life, you have to think and decide for yourself, taking responsibility for your own life. Simply reading this will do little – probably nothing. The most important and difficult part falls on you – on you taking ownership and *creating* the life you want for yourself rather than simply reacting to life as it happens to you.

With that, let's jump into this rabbit hole...

¹ Paul Graham is the founder of Viaweb and Y Combinator. He is one of my favorite writers and his <u>essays</u> are goldmines overflowing with nuggets of wisdom. The quote above comes from <u>How to Start a Startup: Lecture 11 (Hiring and Culture, Part 2) (https://www.voutube.com/watch?v=oq7WDXFVV3s)</u>

The Transition: Self-Awareness, Perspective, Correct Priorities, Process > Outcome

The biggest obstacle I failed to appreciate was how big of a transition it is going from college athletics to the "real world."

While this is a challenging transition for anyone to handle, I think student-athletes are especially prone to struggle at this point in their lives because their main focus and source of joy, mastery, progress, and dedication has disappeared — essentially overnight. For me, this was a huge change in identity and a void was left when I "retired" from tennis. I missed having clear goals, competing and putting myself on the line, and having the structure and support to help me constantly improve. But, most of all, I missed the brotherhood and camaraderie that came from being part of a high performing team that was all-in. I later learned that most teammates and friends who played other sports felt similarly but, while common, it was rarely discussed.

This transition left me feeling unsure of who I was or what I wanted to do, and this led to a lot of wasted time and unnecessary stress. I went out too much, neglected loved ones, and wasn't building towards anything with any *lasting* meaning. Don't get me wrong, it was definitely fun not having practice, tournaments, and pressure for a bit, but it *quickly* became hollow and I knew things had to change.

I eventually faced this hollow feeling by sitting down, for hours at a time, to think through all these nagging questions in the back of my mind. It was difficult and frustrating, but I made it a priority to get to know myself and self-reflect. I asked myself, "What type of person do I want to become? What do I truly care about? What are my values? What do I want to achieve? What do I enjoy? What do I want to avoid? What types of people do I want to surround myself with? Who do I want as a mentor to learn from and model myself after?" Maybe some people do this at a much younger age, but I hadn't. I also didn't want to make any assumptions, so I questioned *everything*.

While slow and often frustrating, this process is *so* worth it because it can act as your north star, helping you course correct if you veer off track. Why? Because it clarifies what you truly want and helps you avoid dead ends and distractions, making it easier to say "no" to anything that doesn't further your priorities. Saying "no" isn't always easy, but it is one of the most important

skills you can develop as it frees you up to spend time on what you most care about.² As Sam Altman said in his excellent essay, *How to Be Successful*,

"Once you have figured out what to do, be unstoppable about getting your small handful of priorities accomplished quickly. I have yet to meet a slow-moving person who is very successful... Eventually, you will define your success by performing excellent work in areas that are important to you. The sooner you can start off in that direction, the further you will be able to go. It is hard to be wildly successful at anything you aren't obsessed with."

Good advice for anyone, but only after the "handful of priorities" are carefully thought through and chosen. If you're a fast moving person, but running in the wrong direction, it does you no good.

Don't be surprised if this process leads to unexpected results. You may discover that what you truly want is not what you might have guessed. It may not be what your parents have laid out for you or what you think "looks good," but you will uncover and illuminate what is *genuinely* most important to you and, as a result, how you should spend your time.

For me, this process helped me gain perspective and clarity in several key areas. What seemed so important to me when I graduated, like wealth, a "prestigious" job, and accomplishment, are "results" that all too often fail to deliver the "rewards" we expect to enjoy: a balanced, fulfilling, and meaningful life that is full of genuine, high-quality relationships – "good company" which we must proactively earn. Good company isn't just finding the right companions, it is being the right companion ourselves – trustworthy, authentic, happy, kind, courageous, and humble. Like many things in life, you have to first give it if you want to receive it. Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden puts this beautifully:

"There is a wonderful, almost mystical, law of nature that says three of the things we want most – happiness, freedom, and peace of mind – are always attained when we give them to others. Give it away to get it back."

² As Steve Jobs said, "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying 'no' to 1,000 things."

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Just like in sports, focusing on process rather than outcome is important in life and will make the "journey the reward." Getting the "win" is obviously nice, but it is the process, the effort, the dedication, and the relationships you build, and not the results that you will find truly matter. To me, this may be one of the most important mindsets that transfer from athletics to life beyond sport.

The Time: Opportunity Cost, Life Dimensions

As you get to know yourself and your value system more thoroughly, you can begin to prioritize your time more effectively. Many people wait too long (or never do it at all) but sitting down and thinking through this while you're young will have priceless and unimaginable positive consequences. **The earlier you do it, the more you stand to gain.**

For 12+ years my schedule was like clockwork: wake up, school, tennis, homework, sleep. On repeat. As an athlete, I'm sure you can relate. I had built some amazing habits through this systematic lifestyle, but I felt them slipping away after I graduated because I didn't have a set routine, system, or clear priorities. I eventually understood that I needed something to replace tennis – something which I could pour my focus, love, and energy into. Those 3-4 hours I used to spend hitting, competing, and cross-training would now go towards my handful of priorities which were revealed through the process of self-discovery we just talked about.

This process can seem "squishy" so, in order to make it more concrete, this is how I approached it. I sat down, visualized, and then physically wrote about the type of person I wanted to become, what I wanted to achieve, what I wanted to avoid. I put myself on my deathbed and asked, "What would I never regret?" These questions helped me better understand myself and how I wanted to spend my *one* life. ⁴ The process and answers to these questions will differ for everyone but, for me, I found that I wanted to focus on the following life dimensions:

1. *Health* – Health is life's fountainhead. Nothing else matters if you don't get this right, so don't let other's short-term sacrifices deter you from making your health a high priority. Understand that the body isn't magic – that if you have the right inputs, you'll get the right outputs. Find a way to balance diet, nutrition, aerobic/anaerobic exercise, strength, mobility, flexibility, sleep, meditation / mindfulness, and whatever else you enjoy that gets you moving, in flow, and out in nature. My goal has been to achieve a high and

³ Jeff Bezos' Regret Minimization Framework (https://www.voutube.com/watch?v=jwG qR6XmDQ)

⁴ One framework which helped make this process actionable for me is the idea of opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is what you give up by pursuing one thing rather than another. I have found that most intelligent people weigh decisions this way because it clarifies how to best spend your most important resource: time. Warren Buffet, one of the all-time legendary investors, has a great practice. He advises to write down your top 25 goals and then circle the top 5 most important. These 5 are on your "to-do list" and goals 6-25 are on you "not to-do" list. Ignore everything on the "not to-do" list until you've achieved your top 5. These secondary goals are the most dangerous because, while important, they are not the most important. This is opportunity cost thinking at work and I'd recommend doing this yourself. It certainly helps me.

consistent level in my mood, energy, and clarity of mind, allowing me to pursue and deepen the other life dimensions.

- 2. Family Make a conscious effort to stay in touch and to tell them you love them and appreciate all that they've done for you. Do it often and do it abundantly more than you think you need to. This will never be wasted effort and when you look back, you'll wish you had done even more.
- 3. Friends—I love the following quote by Grant Fairley as it summarizes much of how I think about friendships. "One of the greatest titles we can have is "old friend." We never appreciate how important old friends are until we are older. The problem is that we need to start our old friendships when we are young. We then have to nurture and grow those friendships over our middle age when a busy life and changing geographies can cause us to neglect those friends. Today is the day to invest in those people we hope will call us "old friend" in the years to come." In addition, never forget that there is a huge difference between money and wealth. The only true wealth in life is to be continuously surrounded by good company. This can't be bought and only arises out of relations over long periods of time. Good company amplifies the good times in life and mitigates the bad. There is nothing more valuable. You must first be deserving of a worthy friend, partner, or mate. Be humble and benevolent. Be nicer than you need to be. Choose these "old friends" carefully because who you surround yourself with shapes you more than you can imagine.
- 4. *Work* Have the *courage* to follow your *curiosity* and the *creativity* to always *love what you do* (much different than the often-heard advice of "doing what you love!"⁷). Find a situation where you're: a) surrounded by high-quality people, b) working on meaningful problems you care about, and c) that benefit the world in some way. When you find this combination, you will be in a great position to learn, add value, and help others.

⁵ While cliché, the golden rule is an invariant strategy, applicable across time, culture, and context. This is representative of a powerful, universal concept – *reciprocation*. People will react depending on how you treat them. Smile and they'll tend to smile back. Hit them and you might just end up with a black eye. You may occasionally get burned by "going positive and going first" but it is the best policy for a happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life. Understanding the power of reciprocation, across physics, biology, and human nature, is a "master key" to dealing with the world and the people in it.

⁶ Paul Graham: Be Good (http://www.paulgraham.com/good.html)

⁷ For more on this, see John Gardner's <u>Road to Self Renewal</u> - <u>https://buildinginnovativebrands.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj7961/f/johngardner-roadtoself-renewal2.pdf</u>

Perseverance, work ethic, humility, and grit never hurt either. "The greatest gift a young man can have is the desire to learn and the willingness to earn it." – Andrew Carnegie

- 5. *Community Service* It may seem hard to find the time, or not worth doing, but keep your eyes open for a cause you believe in and feel good dedicating your time to. Somewhere you can get your hands dirty, learn, help shape the organization in some way, and meet great people. Doing so will give you an appreciation for how lucky you are and the importance of giving back.
- 6. *Personal Growth* Never stop reading, learning, traveling, developing new skills, and building deep, trusting, win/win relationships. Ideas beget ideas so put things out into the world. Publish the paper. Build the product. It takes courage to do these things but there is no better way to grow and connect with others. Like in sports, you're always learning, so keep a "beginner's mind" and be open to feedback.
- 7. *Spiritual Growth* Whatever that means or looks like to you, but make sure to take the time to get rooted, to gain perspective and humility, and to feel connected to something bigger than yourself.

After significant time and deep thought, I am confident that if I keep these 7 life dimensions top of mind and allocate my time appropriately, I will have a good shot at living a happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life.

Determine what these dimensions are for you and what success in each one looks like *in your own eyes.* Then start structuring your life so that you actually spend your time on the dimensions you've determined are most important to you (*this is much harder to live out than you might think!*). This is your new sport, your new training regimen, and you can't imagine how much the mindset, habits, and skills that you've developed as an athlete will help you in your new endeavors.

The Job: Find Work that Doesn't Feel Like "Work"

Aware of it or not, you already have many of the skills and traits necessary to thrive in life beyond sports. This was a surprising and important insight for me and is why I titled this essay *The Infinite Game*. As athletes, we are used to thinking of the 'game' only as it relates to our sport, but it is actually much bigger than that. The game is life itself and the skills, habits, traits, and mindsets that you *earned* as an athlete are just as valuable in life after your sport as they were during.

Specifically, one of the greatest lessons from sport comes from being part of a team and understanding how to cooperate with and lead a group of people with very different styles and personalities. Habits and skills which come naturally through athletics such as teamwork, prioritization, focus, dedication, grit, risk-taking, curiosity, willingness to fail, relentless resourcefulness, and open-mindedness, are game-changing traits that set athletes apart from most others. You have all the tools to be a top "athlete" in whatever your new "sport" is but don't let these *earned* habits disappear – use them to your advantage while they are still ingrained and *build* upon them.

However, even though you have a great foundation and the necessary tools, finding the right job will likely still be time-consuming, stressful, confusing, frightening, fatiguing, and, occasionally, boring. But, don't worry. Almost nobody knows what they want to do right out of school. It takes time to get to know yourself, what you want to do, and what you *don't* want to do. The goal with work is to find a *vocation*, not just a job. A situation where work doesn't feel like "work." A role you love, where you can learn and grow, where you are surrounded by people you love, where you work on hard and meaningful problems that can make a big difference. Maybe even a situation that feels easy to you but others struggle with. This can be a strong signal of your talents and potentially what you should focus on.

While seeking this vocation, understand that it is far more effective to ask who you want to be than what you want to do. So, if you can gain self-awareness like we have already discussed,

⁸ Paul Graham's <u>Relentlessly Resourceful</u> – <u>http://www.paulgraham.com/relres.html</u>

⁹ Conversely, take steps to mitigate your negative qualities (we all have them!) and take extra precautions towards not exhibiting traits typically associated with "jocks" – being loud, aggressive, crass, domineering, entitled, arrogant, etc. Blend in "soft" qualities such as patience and empathy alongside your "hard" qualities such as competitiveness and leadership. The resulting combination or "alloy" will be stronger than you ever imagined. This has been some of the best self-help advice I've ever been given and I hope it helps you too.

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you'll have a much easier time figuring out which career paths intrigue you and which are dead ends. This will help you be aware of exciting opportunities as they arise because if you have a crystal clear vision of what you want, you will be hyper aware of people, roles, and opportunities that can lead you there. Sounds great, right? Well, how do you do it? **How clear does your vision need to be? It needs to be clear enough so that you would recognize an ideal situation when you see it.** At first glance, this may seem impossible, but if you know what you're looking for, you'll be shocked how often you tend to find it.

The Master / Apprentice Model: The True Wealth in Life

You know how you had a coach or mentor for most of your athletic career? You need that after you graduate too. Most people stop getting coached after retiring from their sport, but eventually come to find that they miss it and feel lost without it. At least I know I did. Everybody can use a mentor to provide unbiased advice and occasional "tough love," to provide feedback, to show and set the high standards required to achieve mastery, and to keep pushing you to grow and learn so that you can become the best version of yourself. I don't think anybody can go through this process solo and, even if they could, developing these kinds of deep relationships is the true wealth in life.

Find people across your various life dimensions who can serve as your coach, your mentor, your exemplar. Very few people will simply volunteer to be this person for you. You have to take the time and the initiative to go out and find the person(s) you would love to learn from, spend time with, and emulate.

In addition to living mentors, you should also study and model the "eminent dead" – those who have accomplished great things in the past. Get to know them through autobiographies, interviews, and other *first-hand* sources. This will improve your pattern recognition skills by enhancing your ability to make connections not only across disciplines, but across time, elevating your intuition from good to sublime. **This is one of life's true shortcuts, a key way to work smarter, not harder.**

I have been *very* lucky to have several amazing mentors in my life – from my parents, my junior tennis coach, my college coaches, and several senior colleagues and bosses. These people have guided me and enriched my life beyond belief and they have made all the difference in the world to me. I love all of them, will be forever indebted to them, and consider my relationship with them one of the most rewarding parts of my life. I hope you get to experience something similar.

Conclusion

I will consider this essay to have been a success if those who read it act any differently afterwards.

That success, then, depends on you. It depends on you taking the time to reflect and to get to know yourself, to decide what you want to devote your energy, time, and passion to, and then having the diligence and patience to figure out how to get there. This isn't all that complicated, but it is difficult, time-consuming, and often lonely work. **On top of it, the benefits probably won't be immediate – driving the "instant gratification" part of us crazy.** This is why self-reflection and deep work are so easily and often put off for "later." But, the sooner you can face the resistance, the more you'll stand to gain as you'll be able to maximize the amount of time you can help yourself and others.¹⁰

I have been so lucky in my life so far and am simply doing my best to pay back those who have helped me along the way by paying it forward. I hope you find something in this essay which resonates with you and, if you do, someday and somehow paying it forward yourself.

Again, congratulations! I wish you the best of luck on your journey and please know that I would love to hear from you and help you in any way possible.

Amor Fati Amor.

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¹⁰ Ryan Holiday's <u>The Obstacle is the Way</u> (http://blas.com/the-obstacle-is-the-way/) and Steven Pressfield's <u>Do the Work</u> (http://blas.com/do-the-work/) are excellent resources on this topic.

The Resources: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Don't know how or where to start? Interested in learning more? The books and resources listed below were chosen because they have had a deep and lasting impact on me, how I think, how I make decisions, how I view the world. I think of many of these books as meta-books, essentially instruction manuals for life, making them great starting points on this journey. I have found that the best approach for me is to slowly read the best books which have stood the test of time, taking the time to really digest them in order to embody and live out their lessons.

- 1. <u>Poor Charlie's Almanack</u> by Charlie Munger and Peter Kaufman This is a multi-disciplinary compilation on how to approach learning and life, how to avoid/mitigate life's most common errors and mental biases, and so much more. I re-read it every year.
- 2. *The 4 Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz Extremely short and simple book with 4 main takeaways always do your best, take nothing personally, make no assumptions, and be impeccable with your word. Attempting to ingrain and embody these simple agreements in my every thought, action, and decision has helped me beyond words.
- 3. <u>The Lessons of History</u> by Will Durant Will and his wife Ariel wrote an 11-volume, 10,000+ page history of civilization and this 100-page book summarizes all of it. Every sentence was carefully chosen and carries an incredible amount of wisdom.
- 4. <u>Letters From a Stoic</u> by Seneca This book captures some of Seneca's universal and timeless wisdom on many topics. I have returned to this book often as it touches on key areas of life and universal truths in a timeless and powerful, yet easy to absorb manner.
- 5. <u>Jonathan Livingston Seagull</u> by Richard Bach A beautiful, short book about the courage it takes to be different in pursuit of something great.
- 6. *Effortless Mastery* by Kenny Werner Expert jazz pianist Kenny Werner discusses his mindset, and some of its counterintuitive points, as it relates to mastery.
- 7. <u>The Path of Least Resistance</u> by Robert Fritz Discusses the importance of creating and how the structure of your life determines much of how we behave, think, and react.
- 8. *It's Your Ship* by Captain Michael Abrashoff My favorite book on leadership which shows how it is possible to turn the same underperforming crew into the cream of the crop simply by changing the culture.

- 9. *The Art of Learning* by Josh Waitzkin An incredible book on learning and mastery from someone who has been world-class in chess, martial arts, and more.
- 10. Paul Graham's <u>Essays</u> Paul Graham is an incredible writer and thinker. His blog posts, along with the books listed above, have undeniably shaped how I think and see the world. So much to be gained from all of his essays, especially those listed below:
 - What You'll Wish You'd Known¹¹
 - Being Popular¹²
 - Taste for Makers¹³
 - Hackers and Painters¹⁴
 - How to Make Wealth¹⁵
 - The Age of the Essay¹⁶
 - What You'll Wish You'd Known¹⁷
 - How to Start a Startup¹⁸
 - Writing Briefly¹⁹
 - How to Do What You Love²⁰
 - The Power of the Marginal²¹
 - How to Do Philosophy²²
 - Be Good²³
 - Mean People Fail²⁴
 - Life is Short²⁵

¹¹ http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html

¹² http://www.paulgraham.com/popular.html

¹³ http://www.paulgraham.com/taste.html

¹⁴ http://www.paulgraham.com/hp.html

¹⁵ http://paulgraham.com/wealth.html

¹⁶ http://www.paulgraham.com/essay.html

¹⁷ http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html

¹⁸ http://www.paulgraham.com/start.html

¹⁹ http://www.paulgraham.com/writing44.html

²⁰ http://www.paulgraham.com/love.html

²¹ http://www.paulgraham.com/marginal.html

²² http://www.paulgraham.com/philosophy.html

²³ http://www.paulgraham.com/good.html

²⁴ http://www.paulgraham.com/mean.html

²⁵ http://paulgraham.com/vb.html

- General and Surprising²⁶
- 11. Worthwhile articles that I return to often
 - The Road to Self-Renewal John Gardner²⁷
 - The Mundanity of Excellence Daniel Chambliss²⁸
 - You and Your Research Richard Hamming²⁹
 - On Being the Right Size JBS Haldane³⁰
 - What Counts is Where You're Coming From Brian Arthur³¹
 - Solitude and Leadership William Deresiewicz³²
 - How to Get Rich Without Being Luck Naval Ravikant³³

Read these at your leisure. It may be today, 10 years from now, or it may never happen. Whatever you chose is totally fine but, if you are compelled to read any of the books, articles, or essays, I'd love to hear what you thought of them.³⁴

²⁶ http://paulgraham.com/sun.html

²⁷ https://buildinginnovativebrands.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbivbj7961/f/johngardner-roadtoself-renewal2.pdf

²⁸ https://www.istor.org/stable/202063?seg=1#page scan tab contents

²⁹ http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/YouAndYourResearch.pdf

³⁰ https://irl.cs.ucla.edu/papers/right-size.html

³¹ https://www.presencing.org/assets/images/aboutus/theory-u/leadership-interview/doc_arthur-1999.pdf

³² https://theamericanscholar.org/solitude-and-leadership/

³³ https://nav.al/how-to-get-rich

³⁴ For a more complete list of books and other resources which have been life-changing for me, checkout my books worth re-reading (http://blas.com/books/books-worth-re-reading/) and worthwhile resources (http://blas.com/category/worthwhile-resources/) pages.

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