

A GUIDE TO GOING ALL IN,
FINDING SUCCESS, AND
DISCOVERING THE
BENEFITS OF AN
UNBALANCED LIFE

NOBLESSE OBLIGE
THE
BRAND
BOOK

**BRAD
STULBERG**

**STEVE
MAGNESS**

COAUTHORS OF THE BESTSELLING
PEAK PERFORMANCE

THE PASSION PARADOX

A GUIDE TO GOING ALL IN,
FINDING SUCCESS, AND DISCOVERING
THE BENEFITS OF AN UNBALANCED LIFE

BRAD STULBERG AND **STEVE MAGNESS**



RODALE.
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2019 by Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Rodale Books,
an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

crownpublishing.com

rodalebooks.com

RODALE and the Plant colophon are registered trademarks
of Penguin Random House LLC.

Portions of this work were originally published in *New York*,
the *New York Times*, and *Outside*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available
upon request.

ISBN 978-1-63565-343-4

Ebook ISBN 978-1-63565-344-1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Jacket design by Sarah Horgan

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION: WHY A BOOK ABOUT PASSION?</u>	9
<u>1 PASSION MUST BE HANDLED WITH CARE</u>	13
<u>2 THE ORIGINS OF PASSION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SUFFERING AND LOVE</u>	18
<u>3 FIND AND GROW YOUR PASSION</u>	35
<u>4 WHEN PASSION GOES AWRY</u>	57
<u>5 THE BEST KIND OF PASSION</u>	75
<u>6 THE ILLUSION OF BALANCE</u>	107
<u>7 SELF-AWARENESS AND THE POWER TO CHOOSE</u>	122
<u>8 MOVING ON: HOW TO TRANSITION FROM A PASSION WITH GRACE AND GRIT</u>	144
<u>CONCLUSION: LIVING PRODUCTIVELY WITH PASSION</u>	162
Acknowledgments	165
Notes	169
Index	179

Why a Book About Passion?

Our last book, *Peak Performance*, delved deeply into the art and science of human performance. We deconstructed powerful, evidence-based performance practices; described how the best athletes, artists, and thinkers apply them; and explained how you, the reader, could, too. Yet throughout our research and reporting, we couldn't help but realize that focusing on performance practices alone misses a crucial point. All the greats shared something else in common: An unrelenting drive. An eternal hunger. An inability to be satiated. Passion.

As part of our writing and coaching—of top athletes, executives, and entrepreneurs—we've been fortunate to develop relationships with many individuals who put tremendous passion into everything they do. They are people who, simply put, cannot be content. People who thrive on the razor's edge. Perpetual pushers of boundaries and limits. People who relish giving something their all.

And, without trying to sound brash, sometimes we notice this drive in ourselves. Perhaps you do, too. As authors, there are few things we love more than being immersed in the writing process. Our most trusted advisors warned us that starting this book before finishing our last was a bad idea, but we couldn't help ourselves. Even though we had some doubts (e.g., "It's too soon for our next book . . ."), the blank page sucked us in, and there was nothing we could do to resist its pull. We just *had* to pursue our ideas and put pen to paper.

And though we're glad we chose to write this book when we did, we'd be remiss not to acknowledge that this urge to keep pushing and pushing also has a dark side, one that extends beyond just reasonable doubts. Passion often comes at the expense of time and energy spent on family, friends, and other activities, including the simple joys of life. Too much passion, especially without equally strong self-awareness (a topic we'll explore later on), can completely uproot your life and lead to burnout. This realization, or dilemma, really, is shared by just about every passionate person whom we've come to know. There's no way around it; when you are deep in the throes of a passion, when you're really going for something, it can seem as if nothing else matters. This can be a good thing, a bad thing, or, more often than not, a bit of both at the same time.

Observing this passionate drive firsthand in Olympic athletes, groundbreaking inventors, original artists, and successful entrepreneurs, as well as experiencing it in ourselves, led us to wonder: *From where does this intense feeling of passion come? How can one find it and what fuels it? How should one make the decision to pursue a passion that appears to conflict with other obligations? What makes passion disappear? Is it always positive? Or is it not so different from an addiction? Is there a right way to live with passion? To go "all-in" on something?*

. . .

COMMON ADVICE IS TO FIND AND FOLLOW YOUR PASSION; to *be* passionate. It's what parents, teachers, coaches, and commencement speakers champion. And yet, at the same time, there's a growing cultural chorus that says following your passion is an irresponsible, if not reckless, endeavor: a path to *dissatisfaction*, poor health, and unease. The truth is that there's merit in both arguments. As you'll see in the coming pages, as much as our culture likes to simplify things—to make them black or white, this or that—passion isn't so straightforward. Yes, passion can be a blessing; it's a hallmark of mastery and a precursor to great success. But if it's not pursued thoughtfully and handled carefully, passion can quickly become a curse, something that is far more destructive than it is productive. This dark kind of passion is especially prevalent in a culture that conditions us to crave quick fixes and instant gratification, tempts us to judge ourselves by the number of “followers” or “friends” we have on social media, and repeatedly tells us that “winning isn't everything, it's the only thing”; a culture that is achievement-oriented and compels us to focus solely on results at all costs.

Fortunately, as we'll show you in the coming pages, the choice to pursue passion—and equally as important, whether it goes in a positive or negative direction—is largely up to you. Passion, when approached in the right way, is an ongoing practice. A practice that leads to not only a wonderful experience of working, but also a wonderful experience of living.

THIS BOOK BEGAN AS AN INTIMATE EXPLORATION TO better understand how we, Brad and Steve, could live with

passion in a constructive, healthy, and sustainable way.* We scoured the literature, reading texts from biology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy; interviewed cutting-edge researchers from across disciplines and all over the world; met with and studied not only individuals whose passion built them up, but also those whose passion broke them down; and looked deep inside ourselves, discovering the good, the bad, and the ugly about our own respective relationships with passion.

Perhaps you have an idea of where you fall on the passion spectrum. Maybe you have an inkling of a career path or business idea you want to pursue, but you have doubts or fears. Or perhaps you're contemplating going all-in on an idea, whether that means starting a company or training to become an elite athlete. Maybe you're already following your passion but you're feeling the beginning of burnout, or you're neglecting other aspects of your life, such as your friends, family, or just experiencing joy outside your chosen pursuit. Or maybe you're feeling all out of a passion that once fueled you. No matter where you are in the passion process, this book will help get you on track. You'll learn how to manage your relationship with passion and cultivate the kind of passion that lights you up rather than burns you out or sets your life on fire.

* The initial step in what eventually became this book was an article Brad wrote for *Outside* magazine titled "What Underlies the Relentless Pursuit of Excellence." Certain sections of that article appear virtually unaltered in the following pages, as does some of Brad's writing from *New York* magazine and the *New York Times*. Brad thanks these publications for allowing him to first explore some of the ideas detailed in this book.

Passion Must Be Handled with Care

“Nothing is as important as passion. No matter what you want to do with your life, be passionate. The world doesn’t need any more gray. On the other hand, we can’t get enough color. Mediocrity is nobody’s goal, and perfection shouldn’t be either. We’ll never be perfect. But remember these three P’s: Passion plus persistence equals possibility.”

—Jon Bon Jovi, 2001 commencement address, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey¹

○dds are, the passion described by Bon Jovi—the wholehearted pursuit of an activity with enthusiasm, fire, and zeal—is the kind with which you’re familiar. It’s celebrated widely and encouraged in nearly all settings, from the classroom to the workplace to the playing field. If you could just discover your passion and pursue it, the story goes, everything else will fall into place. But in reality, it doesn’t always work like that. Even if you find a passion to pursue, you’re probably not given much, if any, guidance on what happens next. While there are plenty of voices telling you to *find* your passion, there are hardly any telling you *how to be* passionate.

The seemingly straight line to success, happiness, and fulfillment that passion promises is almost always a more complicated route littered with potential wrong turns. In the words of Elon Musk, Silicon Valley mogul and founder of Tesla and SpaceX, “The reality is great highs, terrible lows, and unrelenting stress.”² Consider just a few of the negative paths that passion can lead you down:

- **You become a slave to external results and validation.** Following early success, the desire for more—more money, more fame, more followers—can easily take over. Your initial passion for *doing* an activity turns into a passion for achievement and results. You tie your self-worth to external validation, and the experience of a failure, or even just a plateau of moderate success, becomes devastating, rattling you to the core. Your enjoyment decreases (at best) and you become anxious, depressed, and unethical (at worst).
- **You become blind to everything but your passion.** You throw yourself so fully into a pursuit that you neglect everything outside it. Your marriage falls apart. Your children grow up without you realizing it. You ignore your health. You may feel good in the moment—after all, you are consumed by something you love—but years pass and you look back with regret on how you spent your time.
- **You burn out.** Surrendering completely to passion may work for a day, a month, or even a year. But if left unchecked, most passions burn bright and burn short. It’s not that you don’t want to pace yourself, but simply that you can’t. You’re far too overwhelmed by the acute pull of passion to realize the emotional and physical effort you are putting forth may be unsustainable. Before you know it, you run out of energy. What could have been a lifetime of passion and meaning-

ful work instead looks more like a short bout of reckless excitement.

- **You lose joy.** There is also a risk that your passion's spark will dim slowly over time. A familiar story goes like this: You turn what started off as a wonderful hobby into a job (*Blessed!*); then you realize that what once was a wonderful hobby soon starts to feel like a job (*This isn't what I thought it would be like*); and it's not long before you start to question how something you once loved can seem like a chore (*How on earth did this happen?*). Though you never thought such a turn was possible, you come to dread your passion.

There is, of course, a different—and far better—kind of passion. It emerges when you become wrapped up in an activity primarily for the joy of doing the activity itself. When you experience success with humility and failure with temperate resolve. When your goal becomes your path and your path becomes your goal. When your passion is fueled by deep purpose and is in harmony with the rest of your life. When you practice mindful self-awareness to pierce through the tidal inertia that passion can create, giving you control over your passion so your passion doesn't control you. When you feel alive not just for a few months or years but for an entire career or lifetime. *This* is the passion we all crave. *This* is the best kind of passion.

Almost all passions begin as enthusiastic pursuits. No one wants to burn out, throw their lives out of balance, or lose joy. Passion's positive and negative paths—the good and bad kind of passion—arise from the same place; it's just that if you don't proactively prevent passion from veering off course, it's likely to do so, oftentimes without you even realizing it. Put differently, passion is fragile, and it must be handled with care. This is why research shows that passion isn't just linked to happiness,

health, performance, and life satisfaction, but also to anxiety, depression, burnout, and unethical behavior.

Though lots has been written on how to find your passion, much of it is misguided, rife with clichés while short on evidence. And, as you're starting to see, finding your passion is only half the battle anyway. Knowing how to sustain and channel it in a productive and healthy manner is the other—and equally important—half. Unfortunately, that half is rarely,

if ever, discussed. As a result, far too often passion goes awry and people suffer from some version of the negative repercussions described above.

Passion is fragile, and it must be handled with care.

This book aims to change that. To show you how you can find and cultivate passion and how you can manage its immense power for good. We'll show you that what direction your passion takes is a choice, not a predetermined destiny. We'll give you practical tools to ensure that your passion burns bright, long, and in harmony with the rest of your life. And we'll do this without using trite clichés that dominate so many other books about this topic. We'll be authentic and honest, bringing to bear not only the latest scientific evidence but also the thinking of some of the world's most considerate poets and philosophers.

In order to achieve this goal, we'll undergo a thorough exploration of passion. We'll examine both the biological and psychological drivers that give rise to passion, as well as the stories of extraordinarily passionate individuals. Some of these stories will be positive, like those of Olympic swimming star Katie Ledecky and investor Warren Buffett; others will be cautionary tales, like those of the fraudulent businessman Jeffrey Skilling of Enron and baseball cheat Barry Bonds. We'll question the merits of living a “balanced” life, explore how self-awareness prevents future regret, and discuss the importance of the sto-

ries we tell ourselves about ourselves. We'll learn that passion is not an emotion that should be left to its own devices but rather one that should be harnessed with deliberate intention. But before we do any of that, in order to lay the groundwork for how we can live with the best kind of passion, we must first gain an understanding of its roots. We'll start by traveling back in time to a distant yesterday, when the notion of passion first emerged.

PASSION PRACTICES

- Everyone tells us to find our passion but no one tells us how to find it, let alone how to live with it.
- While most passions start off as positive endeavors, they often take turns for the worse.
- If you don't proactively manage your passion, you put yourself at risk for:
 - Becoming a slave to external validation and results.
 - Burnout.
 - Regret.
 - Loss of joy.
- If you do proactively manage your passion, however, living with passion leads to improved health, happiness, and overall life-satisfaction.
- In other words, there is both good passion and bad passion. And what direction your passion takes is largely up to you.

The Origins of Passion

A Brief History of Suffering and Love

Born out of the Latin word *passio*, which means “suffering,” for the vast majority of history, passion meant just that: suffering, misery, and anger. Initially, the suffering that passion alluded to was narrow, used to describe a particular person and a particular instance of anguish: the unremitting torture that Jesus Christ faced during his crucifixion. “The word was singularly related to Christ,” explains professor Timothy K. Beal, chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Case Western Reserve University, “and it was completely tied up in his suffering.”¹ Some viewed Christ’s death as tragic, whereas others believed there was a profound purpose behind it. Either way, for nearly a thousand years, *passio* was dedicated exclusively to describing the suffering of Christ. To wish *passio* upon anyone, or to instruct anyone to pursue it, would have been viewed not as supportive or inspirational but as toxic and harmful.

Over time, however, the definition of *passio* broadened. By

the eleventh century, *passio* had expanded outside of religion, its usage now referring to all suffering and pain—both physical and psychological—and in all people. Although still far different from the way passion is used today, its definition was no longer tied to Christ. A few hundred years later, as Europe emerged from the Dark Ages, so, too, did passion emerge from its dark meanings. It wasn't long before the European Renaissance brought about a literal transformation of the word from *passio* to *passioun* to *passion*. With each turn, the word assimilated new meanings, transitioning from suffering to rage to love and, finally, to overwhelming desire. The creative arts are at least partially to thank for the transformation. This began with Geoffrey Chaucer, who, in his epic collection of stories, *The Canterbury Tales*, deployed passion to denote not suffering but rather a more generalized uncontrolled emotion. Other authors followed, employing passion in what at the time were novel ways. In 1588, Shakespeare used passion to describe not a negative emotion but a highly sought-after one. In the drama *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare co-opted the word to signify romantic lust and desire, writing, “And that my sword upon thee shall approve, / And plead my *passions* for Lavina's love.”² With Shakespeare's prose, passion was shedding its roots in suffering and shifting toward a more attractive, positive meaning.

Still, it wasn't until the eighteenth century that passion became broadly associated with a more widespread zeal: a love and desire not just for another person, but also for some sort of pursuit or activity. And even then, the word's rise to ubiquity has been a slow one. Phrases like “follow your passion” or “find your passion” didn't enter the common vernacular until the mid-1970s. However, at that point, passion quickly became all the

In many ways, passion and suffering are still very much connected.

rage, and it's stayed that way ever since. In the '70s, the baby boomers were coming of age and embracing a can-do, "you get out what you put in" attitude. World War II seemed long in the past and the Vietnam War was coming to an end. The Western ideal began to shift from security to self-actualization, a trend that only accelerated with Generation X and now Millennials. By the time Bon Jovi gave his commencement speech to Monmouth University students in 2001, positive and inspirational phrases including the word *passion* were blossoming and becoming ever more popular. Today, one would think that passion is key to living a good and productive life. We're told we must do whatever it takes to find and follow our passion and that our careers, relationships, and hobbies are all better if they're fueled by it. But as you'll soon see, we shouldn't be so quick to write off the word's original meaning. Because in many ways, passion and suffering are still very much connected.

A CHEMICAL REACTION: THE BIOLOGY OF PASSION

The sensation of being wholly consumed by an activity, idea, or person is familiar to anyone who has had even just a brief dance with passion. Whether you become passionate about someone or something, the reaction is much the same. Your world narrows and the only thing that seems to matter is the object or activity of desire. Your romantic crush becomes all you can think about. You can't step away from the canvas. Even though your body is at dinner with your family, your mind is elsewhere, fixated on the new product you're launching or how you could rewrite the second sentence in the fifth paragraph on the thirty-fourth page of your book. Complete tunnel vision. Full-on immersion. Passion's got ahold of you.

ing her running career, like when she won the American River 50 Mile Endurance Run in 1985 or the 100-mile-long Western States Endurance Run in 1989, or when she set both the Western States and Leadville Trail 100 course records in 1994 (all significant races that many ultrarunners compete in only once, let alone win). But Trason kept coming back for more. “I always had this urge to see what else I could do,” she says. It was an urge that propelled her to become the most decorated ultrarunner of all time and to break down gender barriers that transcended running to affect all endurance sports. During her career, Trason broke over twenty world records, won the Western States—the most prestigious ultramarathon—*fourteen times*, and set countless course records, many of which still stand today.

We asked Trason—who, in addition to her running prowess, is highly educated and very reflective—about her innate hardwiring, about the little girl whose parents tied bells to her shoes. She had this to say: “I often wonder about dopamine. I always had this yearning to push, push, push—to see what I was made of, to beat myself and then keep going for more. It never went away. Biochemistry isn’t everything, but I have to imagine it’s a factor.”⁴

The latest scientific research supports Trason’s hunch. Some studies show that up to 40 percent of our personality may be inherited. Professor C. Robert Cloninger, a psychiatrist at Washington University’s School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri, recently developed a system for evaluating the heritable part of personality, referred to as *temperament*. His research suggests that there is a link between our inborn temperaments and our sensitivity to specific neurochemicals.⁵ In particular, he found that “persistence,” one of his four major temperament styles, is closely associated with an insensitivity to dopamine. Remember, dopamine is released during the pursuit of goals, so

it's not surprising that people who are insensitive to it (and thus need more of it to feel good) embody persistence, demonstrating unwavering determination and relentless drive. The more dopamine someone needs to feel good, the more willing she is to strive for and chase after ridiculously challenging rewards, even if doing so turns out to be detrimental to her in some way. In other words, she's got to get her dopamine fix. Although we like to think that personality traits like persistence result from hard work or how we were raised, that's far from the whole story. Some of us, like Trason, are born with a predisposition to passion. Yet it's also true that the biology of passion can come to affect us all.

The more someone repeats an activity—especially ones that yield positive feedback, be it winning gold medals, achieving promotions, or luring in romantic partners—the more they crave dopamine. Each time we pursue such endeavors, dopamine is released, increasing our arousal, attention, and motivation. Over time, and in a process similar to other addictive substances, our brains become less sensitive to dopamine, meaning we need more of it to feel good. This craving, if you will, leads us back to the pursuit, which triggers the release of yet more dopamine. And so a cycle of longing, and one that is inherently resistant to contentment, persists. It's worth reiterating that this cycle is a natural one. It results from our evolutionary programming, which pushes us to become addicted to the pursuit of rewards, not the achievement of them.

In his book *The Biology of Desire*, neuroscientist Marc Lewis writes that changes in dopamine requirements, meaning you need more of it to feel good, are caused by the “repetition of . . . powerful experiences that affect us deeply.” As these experiences become even more meaningful, he explains, the corresponding brain changes gather even more momentum, in

essence, building on themselves. Such experiences might involve drugs or alcohol: “Alcohol and heroin would certainly be less addictive, and a lot cheaper, if they led to experiences that were boring,” Lewis writes.⁶ But doesn’t the process of falling in love, or the pursuit of excellence in sports, art, or business, also count as the motivated repetition of something special? Surely these pursuits can be equally as enthralling as a drug-induced high. And even though the outcomes of pursuits like these may be drastically different from drinking or doing drugs, what’s happening inside our brains is very much the same; we’re getting hooked on a powerful feeling. As we’ll discuss in a few pages, the line between what we consider a destructive addiction and a productive passion is a fine one, if such a line exists at all.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE BIOLOGY OF PASSION IS COMPELLING, but it is also young. Our understanding of the exact biochemical mechanisms underlying passion may change over time as the science progresses. Even so, there is enough evidence to believe that the overarching message is here to stay: A part of what we experience as passion is rooted in our genetic code and amplified by our neurochemistry. Some of us may be born with a persistent disposition, yet all of us can get hooked on the repetition of meaningful activities, whether this means seeing progress in training for a marathon, learning to play guitar, building a company, accelerating in one’s career, or falling deeper into a romantic relationship. When we experience an intense urge to pursue something or someone, dopamine is flooding our brain, causing us to feel

The line between what we consider a destructive addiction and a productive passion is a fine one, if such a line exists at all.

good in the moment and making us want to come back for more in the future. It is in this manner that passion builds on itself.

A compelling story, yes. But a complete one? Not quite. While our hereditary nature is important, so, too, is our nurture, or our life's experiences. Our DNA expresses itself differently based on the myriad of environmental factors to which we are exposed. Identical twins might carry the same genetic code, but almost always go on to live distinct lives with differing degrees of passion. In order to more fully understand what gives rise to the feeling of passion, then, we must look not just to biology but to psychology, too.

PASSION PRACTICES

- Passion is fueled by a neurochemical called dopamine.
- Dopamine doesn't make us feel good or content once we've achieved something; it makes us crave the chase.
- Some of us are born with an insensitivity to dopamine, thus predisposing us to feelings of passion and obsession.
- We are all, however, affected by the biology of passion. The more we pursue an activity that offers meaningful rewards, the more dopamine is released, leading us to build up a resistance over time.
- There is a biological reason why the wonderful feeling of passion cannot coexist with the wonderful feeling of contentment. Passion builds on itself: the more we push, the more we get hooked on the feeling of pushing.

SOMETHING TO PROVE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PASSION

In 2009, endurance athlete Rich Roll was named by *Men's Fitness* as “one of the twenty-five fittest men in the world.”⁷ But unlike the ultrarunner Ann Trason, Roll wasn't always buzzing with endless energy; nor did he find himself obsessively gravitating toward any single pursuit as a kid. If anything, Roll was soft-spoken and shy, and carried himself with a calm demeanor. He was also an outsider. “I grew up kind of lonely,” he tells us. “I didn't ever fully fit in. I look back and think at that time [during my childhood], I had all these doubts. I really wanted to prove myself, both to myself and to the outside world.”

Roll was raised in a goal-oriented family. “Drive and achievement were an ethos in my household,” he remembers. Even though he performed well academically, eventually earning acceptance to Stanford University, he felt that he never quite lived up to his parents' expectations. “The bar was just really high all the time, and I felt like I could never really reach it.” In addition to his early academic “struggles,” Roll struggled socially as well. “I was just an all-around extremely awkward young kid,” he explains. “Picked last for kickball, wore braces and headgear, had a patch on one eye, was bullied on the playground, had difficulty learning. You get the point.”

Put yourself in the shoes of nine-year-old Roll, and it's easy to see how he might have felt like he just wasn't good enough. But that all started to change in middle school, when Roll gave swimming a shot and immediately showed promise. “I wouldn't say I was a total natural, but yeah, it was clear that I was strong in the water,” he recalls. Finally, after years of insecurity and self-doubt, Roll had discovered a venue in which he could excel. We asked Roll to try to remember what he was thinking when