

1% Better

REACHING MY FULL POTENTIAL
AND **HOW YOU CAN TOO**



Chris Nikic & Nik Nikic

FIRST PERSON WITH DOWN SYNDROME
TO COMPLETE AN **IRONMAN® TRIATHLON**

WITH **DON YAEGER**

11-TIME NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

© 2021 Chris Nikic and Nik Nikic

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing Group, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

IRONMAN® and 70.3®, and their respective logos, are registered trademarks of World Triathlon Corporation in the United States and other countries.

This independent publication has not been authorized, endorsed, sponsored or licensed by, nor has content been reviewed or otherwise approved by, World Triathlon Corporation, d/b/a The IRONMAN Group.

Any internet addresses, phone numbers, or company or product information printed in this book are offered as a resource and are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the existence, content, or services of these sites, phone numbers, companies, or products beyond the life of this book.

The information in this book has been carefully researched, and all efforts have been made to ensure accuracy. The author and the publisher assume no responsibility for any injuries suffered or damages or losses incurred during or as a result of following the exercise program in this book. All of the procedures, poses, and postures should be carefully studied and clearly understood before attempting them at home. Always consult your physician or qualified medical professional before beginning this or any exercise program.

ISBN 978-0-7852-5645-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021940095

ISBN 978-0-7852-5618-2 (TP)

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE ACHIEVEMENT- HABIT MINDSET

Chris vs. Other Elite Special Olympics Athletes
(Triathlon Distance in Miles Completed over 30 Months)

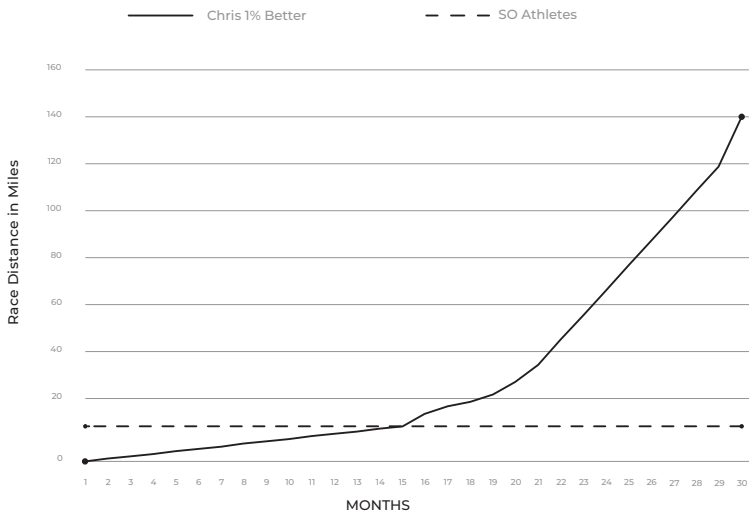


Figure 1

Chris vs. Other Elite Special Olympics Athletes (Improvement Percentage in Time for Finishing a 15-Mile Sprint)

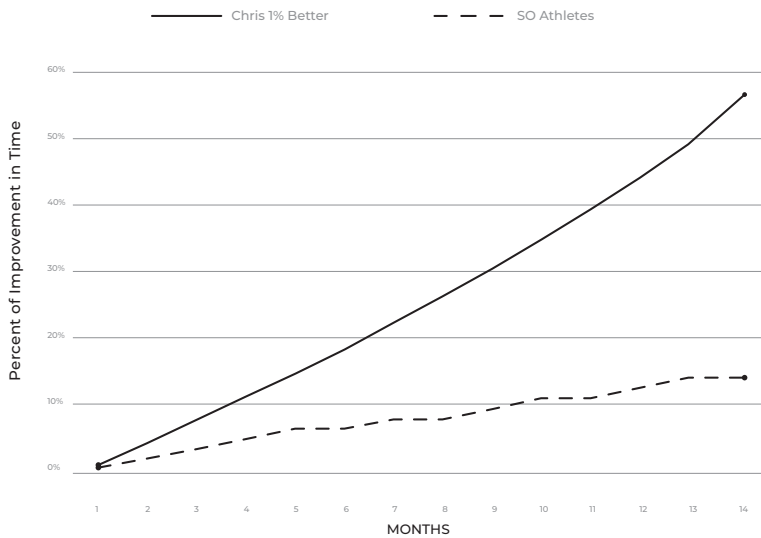


Figure 2



APPENDIX

The 1% Better System

Through Chris's story we hope to offer you a more effective approach to achieving your important goals and dreams by using a different system that is better aligned to use your strengths and overcome obstacles. We all are born with certain strengths and weaknesses, and our successes, in large part, owe much to how those strengths and weaknesses align with a success system designed by American society.

My parents brought me to the United States, and my strengths aligned well with this system. Had I stayed in Montenegro (in communism and poverty), I would be a different person, and I don't know how well my strengths would have fared. Over the past fifty years, I became familiar with and benefited from the American system. And now I am living the American dream, which includes seeing our son exert a positive impact on the world by challenging perceptions of what is possible.

Let me explain what I mean by "success system." Two

of the key parts to the system are education and sports. The system is designed to prepare children from the age of six to twenty-two to fit into socioeconomic brackets that define them for the rest of their lives. Of course there are exceptions, and individuals can make decisions later in life to change their socioeconomic status, but, for the most part, you can look at someone's progression through these years and predict where they are likely to end up.

Here is an oversimplified explanation of how this system works:

1. **EDUCATION.** Children are separated by grades and then subdivided into groups: gifted kids who attend advanced placement classes, a general pool of average-to-good students, and kids with special needs who are put in the corners to sit alone and be ignored (as was true for our son, Chris). Based on their grades and test scores, the top of the class ends up in the most prestigious universities (for example, our daughter, Jacky, who attended Dartmouth) or in the most successful programs at the colleges they attend. With rare exceptions, their paths are set for the rest of their lives.
2. **SPORTS.** Kids are separated as early as age six, and some are placed on travel teams in a particular sport so that by the time they are twelve years old or so, they are practically guaranteed to receive a college scholarship and have a shot at becoming a professional player. They are put in an environment to compete against the best, which in turn continues to separate them from the rest.

The premise of this book is to challenge that system, which is designed for people who are born with seemingly greater intelligence, ability, and drive, who are more likely to succeed in that system and, as a result, earn significantly higher wages and build greater wealth. This system is optimized for the top 1 percent and rapidly declines in effectiveness as it moves down to 5 percent, 10 percent, and so on. It's designed to accelerate the development of the top 10 percent and leave everyone else behind. Basically, as the following table shows, a very small part of the population succeeds while the rest fail.

Wages in the United States

2018 Annual Wages	
GROUP	WAGES (AVERAGE)
Top 1 percent of Earners	\$737,697
Top 5 percent of Earners	\$309,348
Top 10 percent of Earners	\$158,002
Bottom 90 percent	\$37,574

Source: Julia Kagan, "How Much Income Puts You in the Top 1%, 5%, 10%?" Investopedia, <https://www.investopedia.com/personal-finance/how-much-income-puts-you-top-1-5-10/>.

THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM

I am a beneficiary of the current system because I was born with the intelligence, ability, and drive to succeed. The current system was designed for people like me. Our daughter, Jacky, is also gifted with the intelligence, ability, and drive to succeed in the current system. Raising her was easy: all my wife, Patty, and I had to do was guide her through the

current system that was ideally suited to her abilities, which was simple enough since we had already successfully navigated through that system ourselves.

Chris, however, has special needs and lacks the intelligence, ability, and drive to succeed in the current system. Fortunately, God gave Patty and me the ability to recognize this problem and inspired us to take action to solve it. You see, our love for Chris is so great that we would turn the world upside down to help him succeed.

Chris gave us the inspiration to look deeper, and what we learned was simple: (1) Chris may not have the intelligence, ability, or drive to succeed in the current system, but (2) he has demonstrated the intelligence, ability, and drive to succeed through other means, so (3) we needed to design a different system that would focus on Chris's learning style, level of motivation, learning curve, intelligence, and abilities.

Chris spent the first eighteen years of his life in the American success system and ended up in the bottom 1 percent in practically every area of life. Then, from the ages of eighteen to twenty-one, Chris went through a new system—the 1% Better system—and made it to the top percentile in sports and income. Same person but different system and different results. Chris has learned what he can apply in his own life to reach his goals and dreams.

This appendix is about helping you to change the trajectory of your physical and financial future by helping you be the best you can be—1 percent better, one step at a time. You are not a failure. Your intelligence, ability, and drive may be better suited to a different system. The question is, are you willing to try a different system to change your future?

HOW WE DID IT

Using my engineering experience, I designed, built, and executed a system that was ideally suited to leverage Chris's unique strengths and overcome his weaknesses to go from the bottom 1 percent to the top 1 percent. His story can be your story too. Will this 1% Better system work for you? It's up to you, but a good place to start would be to consider the following:

1. If you keep doing the same thing, you'll keep getting the same thing.
2. As Franklin D. Roosevelt is widely attributed as saying, "Take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly, and try another. But by all means, try something."

The beauty of the 1% Better system is that you will know in the first week if you have what it takes to succeed, and then every week after that you will validate it. Let me demonstrate by appealing to your sense of logic.

Here is a simple example using exercise: If you can walk 100 steps today, by getting 1 percent better, in one year you will be walking 3,700 steps. In two years, you will be walking up to 100,000 steps and should have no trouble walking a marathon. Imagine going from 100 steps to a marathon in two years. Do you think your life would change for the better if you could walk a marathon? Imagine your health, your energy, your attitude, and your confidence to achieve other things in your life.

But you don't have to wait to the end of one or two years to know if this is working for you. By the second day, you will be walking 101 steps. If you walk 100 steps today, do you have the ability and drive to walk 101 steps tomorrow? If you do, you'll have gotten 1 percent better. When you do it again and again, at the end of the first week you'll be up to 107—and you'll know that you have what it takes to do it for one week. Then do it again for one more week. Notice what is happening? Every week you will get stronger physically, and, more important, you will get stronger mentally. This is not about the body; this is about the mind. Success is mental. It is a 1% Better mindset. It is an achievement habit.

Contrary to what life has taught you up to this point, the last seven days just proved that you *do* have the intelligence, ability, and drive to succeed. When you do it again for three more weeks, you will prove that you have what it takes to succeed consistently for one month. What do you think that will do for your confidence? Now do it for two more months and you'll have proven you can do it for a quarter. Do that three more times and you'll have succeeded for a year. If you can do that, you will become a mental giant in comparison to where you were before. If you keep at it, the sky will truly be your limit.

1% BETTER MINDSET: BUILDING AN ACHIEVEMENT HABIT

Chris used the 1% Better system not only to complete an IRONMAN triathlon but also to launch a career that includes

public speaking and business ownership. Remember, if you execute the 1% Better system in one area of your life for several years, you build a 1% Better mindset habit, and it spills over into every other area of your life. Chris offers living proof of that.

The 1% Better concept is not a formula; it is a personal commitment to developing achievement habits and a mindset of continuous improvement. Are you in?

Achievement habits work by connecting our conscious goals with our subconscious dreams and the need for pleasure, community, self-esteem, material comfort, and so forth. As we all know, new habits are hard to form, and old habits are even harder to change. Why the emphasis on the achievement habit? Because we have been trained on the value of behavior habits. Behaviors are physical. The achievement habit is mental. This habit is much more powerful because it engages your subconscious mind to look for solutions to obstacles. A habit happens automatically.

I mentioned in chapter 13 that my favorite book on developing habits is *Mini Habits: Smaller Habits, Bigger Results* by Stephen Guise. Guise offered some concepts to explain why habits are so hard to form. As a reminder, here is my restatement of those:

- It takes between 18 and 255 days to form a habit, with the average being 66 days.
- The brain is wired to protect you against big changes and will sabotage your efforts.
- Habits are like muscles; once you've developed a habit, you can make it stronger.

- Trying to develop more than one or two new habits simultaneously will lead to failure.¹²

Why is this important? Because your brain is like a battery. It starts each day fully charged—it has four bars. As with a battery, some activities drain the power faster than others. Behaviors that have not become habitual require much more energy than behaviors that are habits. When the brain is down to zero bars, it is done until you recharge it. So your brain's natural defense mechanism is to avoid adopting new behaviors that are not habits in order to preserve the brain's energy for thinking and emergencies. One way to maximize your brain's capacity is to identify habits that will help you achieve your most important goals and dreams.

If you can develop only one or two habits at one time, what is the best habit to hit your goals and dreams? I would argue that the best habit to develop is the 1% Better achievement habit itself!

THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF THE 1% BETTER SYSTEM

Principles are fundamental truths that serve as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior. An optimal system requires some key foundational principles that must be executed to produce the best results. The three critical underlying principles that drive the 1% Better system are the dream board, metrics, and coaching cadence.

Principle #1: The Dream Board

The first principle necessary for implementing the 1% Better plan is to create a dream board, and it has five components:

1. The *dream* is the reason you do what you do and serves as the fuel to keep going when things get hard. Chris's dream was to make his own money so he could be independent.
2. The *goal* will help you reach your dreams. If not, you have the wrong goal. The goal gives you direction and a target to aim for. Chris's goal was IRONMAN® Florida in November 2020.
3. The *milestones* tell you if you are on track to achieve your goal. They are mini goals that collectively get you to your big goal. Chris's primary milestones were completing an Olympic triathlon in January and an IRONMAN 70.3® race in May.
4. The *strategy* describes how you will execute. Chris's strategy was "Get 1 percent better every day."
5. The *plan* consists of what you do every day to execute your strategy, hit your milestones, achieve your goal, and get your dreams. Chris wrote out his in ninety boxes that he checked off every day.

Chris's dream board takes up an entire wall, and people often ask me why that is. I want him to see it every morning, bigger than life, to remind him of what he needs to do. And I want him to write on it every night so he can celebrate what he did that day to get closer to achieving his dreams. I want

him to read his dreams every day until they seep into his subconscious mind and become his new reality.

Let's take a closer look at the five components of the dream board:

1. The Dream

When Chris began his IRONMAN journey, I knew that he would need something powerful to motivate him on the long road ahead. Chris wanted to achieve something great, so it made sense that if God gave Chris the vision to be great, God would also give him a dream big enough to achieve it.

Here again is what Chris listed when I asked him to write down his dreams on the board:

1. Buy my own car
2. Buy my own house
3. Get a smoky-hot blond wife from Minnesota
4. Have my own money to take care of my family
5. Be a famous public speaker
6. Be a successful businessman

2. The Goal

Chris's dreams were supported by his goal of completing an IRONMAN competition. People often ask me questions like, Why an IRONMAN race? or Why such a big goal? My answer is simple: big dreams need big goals. When I told Chris he'd never realize his dreams sitting on the couch playing video games and watching TV, I also gave him a goal: If you do an IRONMAN triathlon and become a famous public speaker, you will have a chance to get your dreams. That

became the anchor Chris needed to take him all the way to an IRONMAN race as well as put him on track toward the rest of his dreams.

When people ask me to comment on their goals, I often respond by asking them a couple of questions. First, What is the most important goal you have this year? And second, If you achieve that goal, will you be closer to realizing your dreams?

If the goal supports your dream, you have a great goal for yourself. That's it. That is the secret to goal setting. It's really simple, but people tend to overcomplicate goal setting. One goal is better than two, which is better than three, and so on. One goal keeps you focused, improves execution, and gives you a competitive advantage over people who split their time between multiple goals.

3. The Milestones

Whereas goals give you a target, milestones keep you headed in the right direction. Think of them as mini goals that keep you moving bit by bit toward your ultimate goal. Milestones help you keep track of how far you've come and how much further you have to go. They also help you get to your destination on time. Milestones should have weekly, monthly, and quarterly components to them.

Here are some milestones we used for Chris:

- **WEEKLY MILESTONES.** Every weekend Chris would do his long swim, bike, and run. Every week the milestone was for each event to be just a little farther or faster than the week before.

- **MONTHLY MILESTONES.** Every month we would try to do some kind of race and track results to see if Chris's overall pace was improving at a rate that told us we were on target.
- **QUARTERLY MILESTONES.** Every quarter we would see if Chris was progressing enough in speed or distance for a triathlon, going from a sprint in September to an Olympic in January to an IRONMAN 70.3 in May.

4. The Strategy

Strategy (the holy grail of our program and system) describes how you will execute. Chris had one purpose every day: to get 1 percent better. To make things simple for him, we used the concept of “one more” to reinforce the 1% Better strategy.

The idea was clear-cut: start with one of something and progress to your final goal. So when we were told that core strength was critical to all the other events, I picked a simple exercise for Chris to do: one push-up, one sit-up, and one squat. Then I taught Chris that 1 percent better means just one more. So two days later Chris did two sets of one of the exercises. Then three and four sets of another.

A year later, by the time Chris competed in IRONMAN Florida, he was doing four sets of 50 (or 200) push-ups, sit-ups, and squats. In May 2021, he was up to 360, and by the IRONMAN World Championship in Hawaii, Chris will be up to 500. That is the power of 1% Better. We also applied this principle to every other part of his training program.

The key is that Chris's journey to being an IRONMAN athlete did not follow a traditional training program. His

approach was not about building his body using the optimal training strategy, but about building his mind to keep going and never quit until he did “one more.” We knew that once we got his workouts to that point, when things got hard mentally in the IRONMAN event, he would not quit—and he did not.

Our conversations would go like this:

“Hey, buddy, today is your 1% Better core. How many did you do last time?”

He would look at his dream board and say, “I did four rounds of twenty-seven.”

“Great,” I would reply. “How many are we doing today?”

“I am doing four rounds of twenty-eight,” he would answer.

That’s it. He had developed a 1% Better mindset habit, and now it was easier to keep going and building on each day. The same conversation happened around his run, bike, and swim.

Keep in mind, this is a nontraditional system. A traditional workout system that you would get from a professional coach would be something like a 200-yard warm-up, then five 200s at 60 to 70 percent intensity with thirty seconds of rest, followed by five 100s at 80 percent intensity with sixty seconds of rest, and so on. Chris wouldn’t have lasted a day with this approach, much less a week or longer. The traditional program is complex and very sophisticated. And I am sure it’s very effective for the top 1 percent, those who have the ability, intelligence, and drive to succeed.

However, the 1% Better strategy is for the other 99 percent, those who are looking to succeed following a simple, although admittedly *slower*, path to a lifelong habit of continuous improvement and success. In the end, Chris still went from a 16-mile sprint marathon to a 140-mile IRONMAN triathlon in eleven months.

5. The Plan

The daily plan involves interacting with the dream board by filling in the ninety boxes with what you do every day to execute your strategy, hit your milestones, achieve your goal, and attain your dreams. There is power in the daily habit of writing down your activities and achievements and seeing them in the context of the rest of the dream board. It gets permanently embedded into your subconscious mind. It also helps you gain momentum because as you fill in more boxes, there will be fewer empty boxes, and you will see yourself getting closer and closer to your key milestones and your goal. I watched Chris get stronger mentally as he got closer to the end of each dream board.

Principle #2: The Metrics

The second principle for implementing the 1% Better plan is to measure the key performance indicators, or KPIs. Recording daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly metrics is essential. As I discussed in chapter 10, always being able to see the correlation between the three groups of KPIs—leading, leaning, and lagging—and how each one affects the others is important. Without the right KPIs, the entire system falls

apart. I understood the importance of KPIs but not specifically as they related to doing an IRONMAN triathlon. So I hired an expert, Hector Torres. He was an accomplished IRONMAN coach who had a system for measuring. While we did not agree on the training approach, we did agree on KPIs, and I appreciated his expertise and insights. Hector helped me set the right KPIs and targets, and he recommended a training plan for Chris, which I then modified to the 1% Better approach. I followed his plan in principle but not in the exact execution of it.

Since this is an area that needs much more attention than is the purpose of the book, I will just summarize the KPIs for IRONMAN event training as they related to Chris in each of these three groups:

Lead (Activities)	Lean (Achievements)	Lag (Results)
Strength and Bike: Days 1, 3 & 5 Swim and Run: Days 2, 4 & 6	One more each workout Weekly unit gains Weekly performance gains	Average speed per race 16-mile sprints 32-mile Olympic IRONMAN 70.3 IRONMAN triathlon

Principle #3: The Coaching Cadence

The third principle was a weekly cadence call between Chris’s immediate team—including his guide, Dan; his training partner, Simone; and his triathlon coach, Hector—and me. These coaching calls had a consistent cadence, and we would focus on discussing the answers to these questions (I call it M4Q for “my four questions”):

1. What did Chris do over the last seven days?
2. What did Chris achieve these last seven days?
3. What did we learn during the last seven days?
4. What is Chris's activity and achievement plan for the next seven days?

This conversation was always anchored to the KPIs defined in Principle #2. This coaching call was sometimes contentious but always productive, and it created a culture of accountability, which led to continuous improvement. Our hearts and intentions were always good, but there were tense moments because people on the team were very successful people with type A personalities anchored in a traditional system, and here I was trying to design and implement a new system. The tension was caused by two key factors.

First, Chris is just different, and approaches that work for elite athletes do not work for him, so I had to relate everything they said to Chris, and they didn't always understand my translation.

Second, I understood the 1% Better system because I had been thinking about it and building it in the corporate world for years. I tried to explain it, but when people have spent their lives being successful in one system, they have little motivation to consider a different approach. All in all, it was an amazing experience, and we are blessed by an amazing team.

The coaching cadence principle is critical. So to increase your odds of success, you need a partner. This team represented our partners. I call this 1% Better together. Thus, the first thing you need to do when you start this program is find a partner who will do it with you.

HOW DO I START?

Now that you understand the 1% Better system, how should you start? My recommendation is to apply it specifically to exercise in your life. Why? Three reasons:

1. **IT'S EASY.** It is easy to start, do, and measure progress. It literally will cost you nothing and will be your foundation for everything. You can start by walking for cardio and doing push-ups, sit-ups, and squats for your core strength, and a year from now you will be a physical and mental giant.
2. **IT'S FOUNDATIONAL.** It will give you the physical strength and energy to perform better in every other area of your life. It is also scientifically proven that exercise increases the brain's capacity to learn, so through exercise you are increasing your brain power.
3. **IT CREATES A HABIT.** Most important, you are building the 1% Better mindset habit, which can then be applied to every other area of your life.

In this PDF I shared some simple lines I had created on a graph for chapter 13, an approach to achieving success that worked for Chris, so I know it can work for you too. Remember, however, to start and progress slowly because if you move too fast, you will hit a wall before you have the chance to develop the 1% Better mindset habit.

You need about nine months of steady progress to build it. Unlike most habits that are physical behaviors, this is a mental achievement habit. That is why I keep

referring to it as the 1% Better mindset. If you do try to progress too quickly, your body will stop improving before you have had time to build a mental habit. Remember, the 1% Better plan is first about building the mind and then about building the body. The body will catch up eventually, but you must first build the mind.

You may see dramatic improvements early on, but if you start out too quickly, your progress is likely to flatline, and you'll be unable to stick with your plan for the duration. This flatlining effect is precisely what happens to most of us who pursue an improvement plan that emphasizes the big breakthroughs at the expense of smaller improvements.

The 1% Better plan is designed to provide long-term success and to do it as painlessly as possible. Think about it this way: most plans focus on getting you to the final result as quickly as possible. The 1% Better plan focuses on building your mind through a process. It is less concerned with a final result because your improvement never ends.

My prayer for you is that Chris's story inspires you to take action so you can be the person God meant you to be. Your next step is to accept Chris's challenge to get 1% Better for thirty days and to help a person with special needs do the same.

Go to ChrisNikic.com for additional information on how to start building your own plan.