

The Hard Routine

Jason Dougherty



In Andy McNab's bestseller *Bravo Two Zero*, a book about a famous British SAS mission in Iraq, the commandos use the term "hard routine" to describe their mindset, focus, and seriousness when at work. When they step into an actual mission, crossing the line of departure, they say that they go on the "hard routine." From that moment on, the rules are strict, the focus is singular, and all available resources are brought to bear with an intensity that is necessary for success. When they're on the hard routine, there is no room for selfishness, indulgence, compromise, or distraction.

This principle is required in special operations missions, where toughness, determination, and discipline are required for success and, often, survival. But there is a lesson here that applies to all of us, even in less dire circumstances. This lesson involves a principle, or a group of principles, that are as relevant to the workaday stiff as to the tactical operator—to ordinary people who fall anywhere along the spectrum of full engagement in life. The principles of the hard routine are broadly applicable, and, for the type of person who is willing to engage them, can be a powerful catalytic agent for change of all sorts.

But what, precisely, is it? The hard routine is primarily an exercise in mental toughness. As such, it is vital to grasp the component of psychology that permeates the hard routine. In any rigorous endeavor, the bedrock for success lies in the mindset of the

individual. I am reminded of the story popular in the business world about burning boats. Alexander the Great, when he sailed into Asia, disembarked his infantry and then set his entire navy ablaze in the harbor. The only way home meant a march across land and through the enemy: victory or death. Total commitment. A patent psychological shift occurs when the possibility of giving up disintegrates into ashes. The hard routine grants the willing participant entry into a hard sanctum located in a lucid place of the mind, free of the "soft" psychological distractions and habits that can hinder sustained changes in action. In short, it boils down to denial of self-indulgence.

The principles of setting up a hard routine are simple. Following them is too, but it takes total commitment.

1. Recognize that there is a benefit to not getting everything you want.
2. Understand that mental toughness is born of adversity; that it will atrophy if not consistently engaged; and that it carries over to everything you do.
3. Objectively scrutinize one or a handful of things in your life that you *think* you need but could actually do without.
4. Deny yourself those exact things for a specified period of time.

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Like CrossFit, the hard routine is scalable to the situation and the individual. Obviously, the intensity, rationale, and consequences of going “hard” as a catalyst for positive change in daily life are on an entirely different scale than for special operations on dangerous missions. But that doesn’t make it any less relevant for the less “hard” circumstances of our daily lives.

The practical application of the hard routine for an “average CrossFitter” might involve an increased level of commitment to training in frequency and intensity, making sacrifices to attend certifications or training that will improve your knowledge and performance, or committing to dietary change with a concept we can call “resource supervision.” Resource supervision is the proper management of the body’s system of input and output. Broadly applied, and temporarily foregoing regard to the scientific complexities that are a part of that system, resource supervision makes the most of available inputs—nutrition, rest, sleep, hydration, and intentional restriction of sugars, stimulants, and depressants—that produce the energy surges and lulls to which most people are accustomed and that fuel or retard both recovery and performance during training. It’s the glass ceiling of individual CrossFit performance.

Case study

To witness how this might play out in the life of just such an average CrossFitter, let’s observe “Hank.” Hank has been CrossFitting for six months with remarkable adaptation and improvements. He trains three to four times a week and says that he tries to eat pretty well. What “pretty well” means is that he drinks iced tea instead of soda, skips most desserts—unless it’s something he *really* likes—eats a breakfast (which he used to skip entirely) of eggs, oatmeal, and coffee, packs his lunch about three days a week, eats Zone bars for snacks instead of candy bars, and usually drinks beer only on the weekends.

Hank’s performance at his local CrossFit affiliate has improved dramatically since he started. He’s lost about twenty pounds over the past six months, and he’s finally dispensed, once and for all, with the idea that he needs dedicated “cardio” time to trim down. People at work have noticed the change, partly because of his outlook and attitude and partly because he had to upgrade his business-casual wardrobe when his pants got too baggy. Hank flipped over the handlebars of his mountain bike two months ago and, other than a few scrapes, was virtually unharmed, which he attributes to his recent conditioning. He has a six-minute “Fran” time; he still does “Cindy” instead of “Mary,” with a PR of 17 rounds in 20 minutes; “Linda” remains scary; he can do three muscle-ups when all the planets align; his deadlift technique is solid but his snatch is spotty; and he can overhead squat his body weight for four reps.



Hank’s CrossFit trainer issued a call to arms last Wednesday, after Hank puked on “Diane.” “It’s time to ramp it up,” Trainer said. “Base judgment only on the outcome of tests conducted over a hot fire; draw conclusions only after you have brought out with heat and pressure the essence of what’s being tested,” read Trainer from a book by Vice Admiral Jim Stockdale. After some convincing that a little discipline would yield measurable performance results, Hank and Trainer agreed to a 28-day hard routine, broken into four one-week segments. Hank will keep a detailed journal of his training, including notes regarding adherence to resource supervision prescriptions, and he will submit it for review weekly to Trainer, who will post it on the board for everyone to see.

The Hard Routine

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Week 1

- Continue training sessions, and tailor breakfast intake to exact Zone ratios.
- Incrementally wean coffee consumption from five cups per day to zero, dropping one cup each day.
- Eliminate sugar through a similar weaning process.
- Increase water consumption to at least five glasses per day.
- Take two fish oil capsules at breakfast and two at dinner.
- Record sleep patterns in journal (i.e., times for taps and reveille).
- Buy *Enter the Zone* by Barry Sears and read it. Write a one-page summary of findings.

- Selected articles from the *CrossFit Journal* archives.
- *Mastering the Zone* by Barry Sears, followed by *The Paleo Diet* by Loren Cordain.
- *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* by James Stockdale.
- Decide whether the hard routine experience will serve as a gateway or an apex; live accordingly.

Week 2

- Commit to four training sessions per week.
- Continue no coffee, no sugar, and increase fish oil.
- Increase water consumption to six glasses per day.
- Regulate sleep patterns according to general rule of “early to bed, early to rise.”
- Eliminate alcohol from diet.

Hank’s hard routine is now technically over. But, in four weeks’ time, the physiological potential of the human body, of his own body, has begun dawning on Hank in ways he could never before envision. He set PRs on each benchmark workout he did in week 5. His energy levels have increased and stabilized throughout the day. Waking up is easier and falling asleep is quicker. While he got stronger and faster, a few more pounds of fat melted off his body. Hank gave his bathroom scale to his mother, realizing that performance standards mean more to him than body weight or other similar correlates. The fish oil is working at molecular levels, about which he’s now read, though he hasn’t taken the time to really understand the concept in its entirety.

Week 3

- Commit to five training sessions per week.
- Continue no coffee, no sugar, and no alcohol, maintain fish oil intake, and increase water consumption to seven glasses per day.
- Regulate sleep as needed.
- Pack Zone-friendly lunch and snack every day for work, except Friday, when he eats out with his coworkers.

From here, Hank’s next step might be a strict, no-concessions, measure-your-food, two-week Zone hard routine. Or, Hank might continue doing what he’s been doing for the past four weeks—which is not so “hard” for him anymore, now that it’s his habit and the results and benefits are so tangible. Hank is one step closer to “getting it.” No matter where he goes from here, his four-week hard routine has made an imprint on Hank’s psychology and infused itself into his muscle and bone. Hank emerges from his ordeal drawing conclusions brought out by self-imposed heat and pressure. Now, it’s your turn.

Week 4

- Commit to five training sessions per week.
- Attend local Olympic lifting clinic on Saturday.
- Continue no coffee, no sugar, no alcohol, fish oil, Zone friendly-lunches and snacks, and increase water consumption to eight glasses per day.
- Sleep well.

Follow-up, in week 5

- Conduct three benchmark workouts at training sessions to evaluate performance increases. These three are decided by Trainer, based on three varied examples that Hank performed within one month of the start of his hard routine.
- Plan the next 30 days. Focus on weak performance areas, the hierarchy of macronutrients from most favorable to least, and continued study of CrossFit principles, nutrition information, and character formation (from the reading list below provided by Trainer.)

Jason Dougherty served with the Marines from 1996 to 2006 and now sells medical devices. He lives in Park City, Utah, with his wife, daughter, son, and big dog.