



How Winning Works: 8 Essential Leadership Lessons from the Toughest Teams on Earth

By Robyn Benincasa

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Robyn Benincasa has made an art form of extreme performance by competing and winning at the highest levels of sport and business. In her fifteen-year career as a professional adventure racer, she has biked through jungles in Borneo, climbed Himalayan giants in Nepal, trekked across lava fields in Fiji, rafted rapids in Chile—and racked up multiple world championship titles along the way. In her spare time, she is a firefighter and a sought-after keynote speaker on the subject of teamwork and leadership.

In *How Winning Works*, Benincasa shows you how to climb to new levels of professional and personal success. She shares the eight essential elements of teamwork, learned through her extreme adventure racing, that create synergy with all the teammates in your life, from colleagues and customers to family members and friends:

- Total Commitment
- Empathy and Awareness
- Adversity Management
- Mutual Respect
- "We" Thinking
- Ownership of the Project
- Relinquishment of Ego
- Kinetic Leadership

This field guide to success shares the same training tools and exercises that have become wildly popular in the leadership seminars Benincasa gives to corporations, including Starbucks, Deloitte Consulting, 3M, Verizon, Nestlé, Boeing and many others. Stories from her adventure racing also illustrate how winning teams interact under the world's most extreme conditions, from jungles to mountain peaks.

Whether you're trying to beat the competition to market with a new product, scale a looming mountain of deadlines or simply get your kids to clean up their

rooms, the advice in this book will take you on an adventure you'll never forget, and coach you over the finish line to success.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Athlete, firefighter, competitor, mentor, winner. These impressive attributes all accurately describe Robyn Benincasa. In 2002, Benincasa launched World Class Teams, an adventure-based teambuilding company that brings the lessons of teamwork from adventure racing to both the corporate and personal worlds of her audience. She lives in Cardiff, California. Visit her at RobynBenincasa.com.

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Preparation

We seldom succeed in the long run by winging it. Of course, we sometimes end up being forced to wing it because circumstances change, but coming to a race unprepared rarely leads to a strong finish. World-class extreme teammates know this, and they demonstrate their dedication to the end goals and to one another by being fully committed to pre-event preparation. Can you imagine what might happen if, in an adventure race or a desperate fire-and-rescue situation, one of your teammates decided to just hop up off the couch and show up without putting in the training time it takes to become his or her best? In business, we can sometimes fake our way through and get away with being underprepared. We've all done it. But being a member of an extreme team means that you come to the starting line in the best shape of your life and one hundred percent committed to the goal, even if achieving it means you have to crawl there with someone on your back. People are counting on you, and the bigger and more audacious the goal, the more important your preparation and ultimate contribution will be.

In the races we've won, each of the team members started in peak mental and physical condition and had nothing left at the finish line. We used up every spiritual and physical resource we had in the course of the race. If even one person had shown up in less than their absolute best shape, we wouldn't have been lying there on the finish line, gasping for air and sobbing, but victorious nonetheless.

Many people thought my teams were just lucky when we first started winning races, but we had a different definition of luck. To us, luck is the intersection where opportunity meets preparation.

Luck = Opportunity + Preparation

Without preparation, there is no luck. Opportunities come and go, but why wait passively for opportunity to knock when you can take control of the situation and create some for yourself? When you are fully prepared to capitalize on whatever comes along *and* able to generate a few opportunities for yourself, you become the luckiest person who ever lived.

One of the luckiest people I know is Steve Gurney, a New Zealand adventure racing champ. In the weeks leading up to the 2003 Lake Tahoe Primal Quest event, a 450-mile-long, five-day adventure race through the Sierras, Steve contacted the race director and asked for details about the kayaks that were going to be provided for the paddling segment. He wanted to know what type of boat it was and what all the

measurements were. Unbeknownst to the race officials and his competitors, Steve had been doing some research and tinkering around with his kayaks at home, trying to figure out how to make them go faster. He discovered that the longer and thinner the boats were, the faster they would go. Based on the specs of the kayaks that we were going to be given to use in the Tahoe race, Steve designed and built this crazy nose cone contraption that he could fasten to the front of the Primal Quest kayak to stabilize and lengthen it by about five feet. I'm not sure if he built it on site in Nevada or had it shipped from New Zealand, but his crew had it waiting for him at the start of the paddling section. As "luck" would have it, Steve's invention worked like a charm. By the end of the first leg, his team was at least an hour ahead of the next closest boat and well on its way to winning.

Everybody in that race had blindly accepted that we had to use the boats as is, that we would have to do the best we could with what we had. Everybody, that is, except that lucky devil, Steve Gurney. He turned the whole race on its ear and said, "Why do I have to use only the tools they give me? Why can't I make what we've got better? There's no rule that says I can't."

That's the kind of lateral thinking that wins sporting events—and contracts and clients and sales. If the rules don't prohibit it, then it's fair game. Why resign yourself to the parameters and just run the race as it's laid out for you? When you're totally prepared to create your own game and do it better than anyone else out there, that's the kind of thinking and behavior that makes you a world-class leader and an extreme teammate like Steve Gurney.

That's also the kind of thinking that made my racing buddy, New Zealand's John Howard, the most decorated adventure racer throughout the 1990s. John was a consistent winner because he was a pro at making sure his team always had viable options from which to choose. He was the King of Options. One of us would show up with a certain kind of ice axe or a particular type of snowshoe or a standard piece of climbing gear and be satisfied with that, but John would never settle for it. He knew that what was required to succeed in the moment was not always what the team originally thought it would need, so he always brought a wide variety of tools. That way we could choose the best one for the changing conditions each and every time. Other teams didn't give themselves the luxury of options. Expecting snow, they'd be content to pack their snowshoes, and then out in the middle of nowhere, they'd discover that the snow was actually more like ice and what they really needed was crampons. And they'd be moving like pond scum. But because of John and his options, his teams were always ready for anything. John understood that change is the only thing you can count on in racing, in business and in life. Standing at the base of a soaring mountain with the right tool for that particular job in that particular moment makes all the difference in the world.

Which brings me back to Mike Kloser. Along with John Howard, Mike is one of the most victorious guys in the sport. In addition to his "never say die" attitude, Mike was "lucky" for a couple of additional reasons, both having to do with preparation. First, he trained scientifically. If he was going to be running an altitude race, he went to that altitude two weeks ahead of time. If he was going to be in a heat race, he jumped around in the sauna for two months before the event. Few others demonstrated that kind of total commitment.

The second reason Mike excelled was the condition of his gear. Each competitor has a gear box containing his or her personal equipment—things like batteries, climbing gear, headlamps, ice axes, bike shoes, helmets and medicine. You pack your own box, and then your crew brings it out whenever you get to a transition area. You sit down, have a little something to eat, warm up or cool off, stow your stuff from the last leg in your gear box and get out your stuff for the next leg. If everyone on your team does this correctly, then you should be in and out of transition in around twenty minutes. But if your gear box is disorganized to begin with, or if you throw your old wet clothes from this leg on top of your old wet clothes from the last leg, then by the end of the race, it's an absolute train wreck in there. Your brain is fried from exhaustion, and you can't

find anything you need because you didn't take the time to prepare and organize your gear box properly. Don't ask me how I know this. In the transition area, my nickname was Yard Sale for a reason.

But then there was Mike Kloser. He was so much cleaner than everyone else with his transitions, figuratively and literally. Before the race, he took the time to create little drawers and containers that were exactly the right size for each piece of gear, with everything appropriately labeled and perfectly laid out inside.

Mike was always the first one ready to leave transition. He was always the one who knew where his stuff was, and he was always the one who didn't forget anything. I'd be whining about losing a headlamp, searching in vain through the wreckage that was my gear box, and invariably Mike would say in this matter-of-fact tone, "Well, I've got one right here, in the appropriately labeled headlamp pouch. Take it."

Mike understood that the extra preparation he went through before the race might seem unnecessary or excessive at the time, but he also understood that our minds were not going to work properly in the heat of battle. He knew that if he could keep himself somewhat organized, he would be able to get himself and his teammates through the race so much more cleanly. Instead of digging around in his box in the middle of the night, he was going to know exactly where his batteries, his gloves and his spare bike chain were. Mike was never the one holding up his team. He was never the problem because he always showed up one hundred percent ready to go. He believed that preparation was going to be one of the keys to his racing success, and he was right. We, his eternally grateful teammates, appreciated that, even though we teased him about it.

We also appreciated native Australian Ian Adamson and his glorious way with maps. In adventure racing, you receive your course maps about twenty-four hours before the race. These maps aren't like your grandpa's Rand McNally road atlas. They consist of about thirty huge maps that you have to lay out end to end so you can see the entire seven-day course and plot each checkpoint along the way to figure out the quickest route to each one. Every team has its own recipe for how they handle these maps. The least prepared teams would plot the checkpoints and decipher the route to the first few, firm in their belief that they could then figure out the rest on the fly. Then they'd head to bed to rest up for the next day's start.

But not Ian Adamson. Not only did he plot all the checkpoints from start to finish but also, with our help, he took the time to chart our course for the entire race. Then he would write tips and hints in the map's margins, noting different things that we ought to be aware of along the way: what this checkpoint was going to look like, how many degrees it was going to be off that last meadow—all the tiny details your brain needs to have spelled out for it when you're sleep-deprived and starving. But Ian was still not done. Once he had everything plotted and noted on the maps, he painstakingly laminated them with contact paper to make them water-resistant, and he filed them away according to his own special system.

Users Review

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