

MALEGRAMS

EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS TO MEN

COACH YOURSELF TO A CHAMPIONSHIP

PAUL PIERCE OVERCAME EVERY OBSTACLE IN HIS WAY. EACH ONE MADE HIM WORK HARDER



In Manhattan Beach, just outside Los Angeles, there is a city park with a 100-foot sand dune. Back when Paul Pierce was a nobody, just some poor kid who thought maybe he'd become a garbage man someday, he'd visit the park regularly. And with the other kids there, he'd charge up that dune.

It's a hell of a workout. It'll make you wheeze. Run that thing from bottom to top, and a basketball court might as well be a waterslide.

Flash-forward to summer 2008: Pierce, now captain of the Boston Celtics, had won an NBA championship by defeating the Lakers. His legacy was secure. He could rest, finally, after a career of struggles and doubts, after boos from the fans, after he was stabbed in a Boston bar. He deserved to celebrate until he forgot what stress felt like.

You've had the temptation, too. You land the job, you score the girl, and you feel secure. You feel *in*—as if you can finally rest. But you can't. Muscles atrophy if you don't work them; life can go slack, as well, if you don't make an effort.

Pierce has a tattoo, "My gift is my curse." He means basketball, but the phrase could apply to anything: When you succeed, you only raise the bar. It's a good thing, but it means you have to

refocus and find new motivation. You must be ready with new goals. If you're not looking up, you're looking down.

Which is why the kids running the dune in Manhattan Beach were joined by a familiar face last summer. It was Pierce. He was out there scaling it six times a day—first walking, then jogging, then running. Running hard.

"Usually when you win the championship, you party all summer and don't work out," he says. "But when I won, I mean, I had my good times, but I used it as motivation to do it again. When you realize you can accomplish something so great, you want to do it again."

When he took the championship, Pierce thought he was at his peak form. Nobody would have disputed it. But there's always room for improvement. Start with food: Pierce was winning games, but he was also eating at all times of the night, scarfing pasta and popcorn. When you look good and feel good, it's hard to think about this stuff being bad for you. But after he took home an NBA trophy and washed the champagne off his head, he changed his diet. He ate regularly. He dropped junk food, excess carbs, and red meat, and switched to fish, chicken, and salads.

And when he arrived at Celtics training camp this season, he was 9 pounds lighter and perhaps more prepared than he'd ever been. For the first time in his career, Paul Pierce was, in every way, starting on top.

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"Michael Olowokandi!"

Swish.

"Robert Traylor!"

Swish.

Know those guys? Maybe not; they're no longer in the NBA. But Pierce knew them well. They were drafted before him, in 1998, the year Pierce was expected to be taken second but instead went 10th. He was disappointed, but then he was motivated: There were nine guys the league thought were better than he was, and that meant there were nine guys he had to show up. So as a rookie, when he practiced his free throws, he'd call out their names.

"Jason Williams!"

Swish.

A key to motivation is finding strength in a weakness—in his case, a perceived weakness. People won't always recognize your abilities. The better man is turned down for promotions all the time, but did that make his abilities evident? Maybe not. It's *your* job to display your worth, not your boss's job to figure it out. "You have to show them that they made a mistake, and that you're better than the guys who were chosen before you," Pierce says. "That was something I needed to do, and it drove me."

It also turned out to be a type of motivation Pierce would turn to again, and he'd really need it. The Celtics may be steeped in glory ("It's almost a religion around here," Pierce says), but until last year, Pierce's time with the Celtics was often difficult. He was the best man on a bad team, an all-star who rarely saw the playoffs. He was tense with reporters and not always loved by fans, and he was even stabbed at a nightclub before the 2000-2001 season. He didn't miss a single game that season, but the failures shook his confidence. In the thick of it, during long losing streaks, Pierce described himself as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The good days were fine, but the bad days were really bad.

You can't bottle that up. Keep negativity inside and you'll start to believe the worst—that you're untalented, unaccomplished, everything you fear

about yourself. So Pierce, a proud man who likes to rely on himself, started turning to others. He'd speak regularly with his mom and brothers and Celtics coaching legend Red Auerbach. They're optimistic people whose opinions mattered to him. Not everyone around him was positive, so he learned who to turn to. That's important: Even when you need advice, you still have control. You can pick the people who'll prop you up. That means you may already know what they'll tell you, but it's helpful to hear it anyway. It's important not to endure your troubles alone.

"Red always said to me, 'Your name is Paul Pierce, and just remember who you are,'" Pierce says. "Understanding who you are is saying, 'You're great, you have tons of confidence, and don't ever forget that.' And that helped me, man. Because when things weren't going right, I thought, *You've got to remember who you are. Don't stray from that. Don't let these things get you down.*"

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Pierce wakes up every day at 7:30. The Celtics have 11 a.m. practice, so he's often in the gym by 9:15. He's done this for years. It's sending a message not only to his teammates, who have seen him sweaty and ready by the time they're strolling in, but also to himself. He's reminding himself that work still needs to be done.

Try it. Show up at the office before your boss does, and see what happens. He'll take notice immediately. In the dead quiet, you'll see the office like you haven't before—not as a place of constant demands, but as a space for strategizing and setting things in motion, for going on offense



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instead of defense. "For that little moment while you're there alone, you can work on things without someone telling you what to do. You mentally prepare yourself," Pierce says. "I think about what I need to do to become better."

But these days, that quiet is harder to find. Pierce has set an example. The team's younger guys are showing up at the gym when he does. They're watching him, learning from him. Blaze a path and you'll be followed. They'll give you credit; they'll take you seriously. It's why Pierce is the team's leader. It's why the city of Boston loves him. It's why he runs that sand dune, and why he'll keep running it, year after year, no matter what happens. ■

JASON FEIFER

BREAK THROUGH THE HARD TIMES

The Celtics had some rough years, and Paul Pierce always looked for help. Here are ways he found it.

STUDY YOUR PREDECESSORS

Pierce is an NBA historian, and not just because he's nostalgic for Bill Russell. He finds comfort in learning about the struggles of great players, because they remind him that success isn't bestowed; it's chased, and the hungriest catch it. "That's what separates the top players today from the rest," he says. "Understanding history means knowing what motivates you."

GIVE YOURSELF A PRIZE

Rewards, like money and fame, are universal. But they're ultimately empty if there's nothing truly personal at the center of your quest. That's what Pierce had when Red Auerbach gave him a few of his cigars. Pierce keeps three of them in his locker, and he'll light one up only if he wins a championship. Last year he took his first taste. "It was stale," he says. "But I smoked it anyway."

BECOME YOUR OWN COACH

Pierce works well with his coaches, but he also values his time away from them. "They tell you what to do," he says. "But you have to think about how *you* can help yourself, before the coach comes in." The most successful men know this balance. It's not only a matter of learning from others; it's about building on what you've learned in order to achieve something unique to you.



Pierce joined Red's cigar club last summer.

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