

Grit, fearlessness and courage are the holy trinity of sporting success

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Whenever we are faced with danger, our instinctive response is either fight or flight: to dominate and control or to separate and avoid. Both carry their own risks.

Fear is a vital emotion that can help protect you from danger and prepare you to act. Finding ways to control your fear can help you better cope with anxiety, insecurity and a lack of energy.

Regular readers will be familiar with the PIES – the Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual dimensions of life. They underpin our responses to most situations.

Franklin D. Roosevelt started his 1933 inauguration speech as President of the USA with these famous words: “The only thing we have to fear is... fear itself.”

Remember that, though fear is uncomfortable – even petrifying – it is rarely lethal.

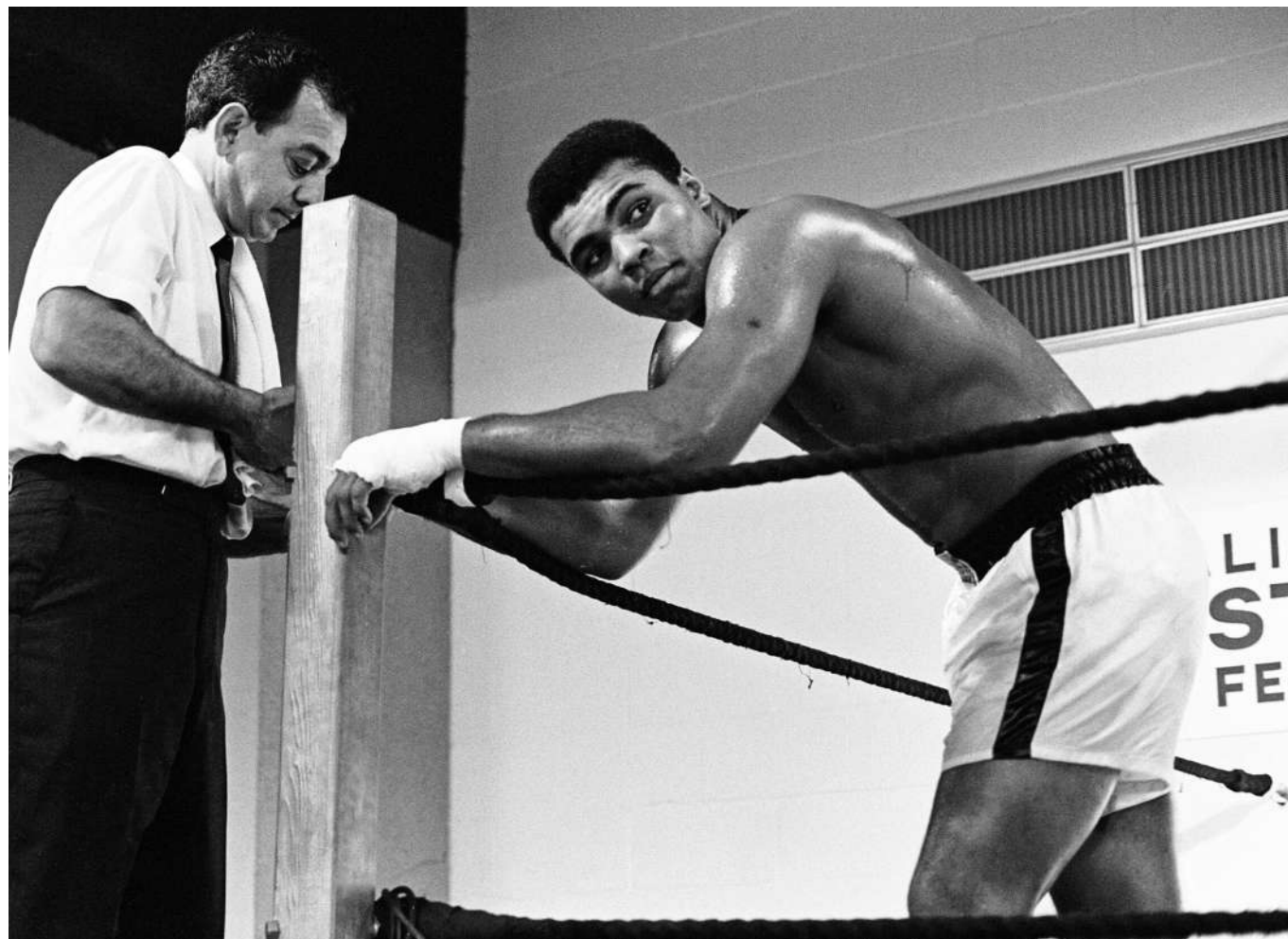
Grit – courage and determination, which has nothing to do with unthinking fearlessness – permits you to face dangers such as the days of Covid, even while feeling fear. Bravery is the ability – some say due to lack of imagination – to confront danger, even pain, without the feeling of fear. Grit, on the other hand, is the ability to take on difficulties and pain, despite the fear.

Grit is not fearless. Having dipped a toe in the water, and felt how cold it is, courage jumps in anyway.

The opposite of fear is joy – or euphoria [Greek for ‘good feeling’]. ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me. You have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.’ [Psalm 23: 4-5] It’s a great feeling when you have overcome your fear – and jumped into that cold water, or stood up for what is right.

“Courage doesn’t mean you don’t get afraid. Courage means you don’t let fear stop you,” stated Bethany Meilani Hamilton, an American professional surfer who survived a 2003 shark attack in which her left arm was bitten off. In 2011, she appeared in the video *I Am Second*, in which she told of her struggle after the shark attack, and how she trusted in God to get her through it.

Ronda Jean Rousey, an American professional wrestler, actress and



Muhammad Ali – aka The Greatest: ‘He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.’

Photo/Action Images, MSI via Reuters

author, voted the best female athlete of all-time in a 2015 ESPN fan poll, had this interesting take on the issue: “People say to me all the time: ‘You have no fear.’ I tell them: ‘No, that’s not true. I’m scared all the time. You must have fear in order to have courage. I’m a courageous person because I’m a scared person.’”

“If you are afraid of failure, you don’t deserve to be successful!” warned Charles ‘Chuck’ Wade Barkley, who established himself as one of the National Basketball Association’s most dominant power forwards.

“The beautiful thing about fear is – when you run to it, it runs away” teaches Robin Sharma, a Canadian writer, whose sport was the law.

The Courage family has two children: physical courage and moral courage. Physical courage is bravery in the face of physical pain, hardship, even death or threat of death. Moral courage is the ability to follow your conscience in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, discouragement, or personal loss. By and large, moral courage is the toughest of the two. [Worth a discussion over a family lunch?]

Physical courage is moving forward in the face of perceived or actual physical danger. Moral courage is more challenging. Overcoming the fear of emotional pain – perhaps rejection by others

– enables you to stay on the high moral ground and to live with integrity. This is vital in leadership – even of your own family. When you speak your truth to power, focus on what you believe can change. As George Orwell – whose sport was writing – said: “In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Long live the revolution!

During World War 2, in Prague, as in any area occupied by the Nazis, the fear of the Gestapo and its torture menu, meant that moral and physical courage – comprehensive grit – had to go hand-in-hand through each day and night.

Talking helps, since thoughts turned into words can change the way you feel. “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1) Because I know God is with me, I can stay calm and care for – as well as seek support from – friends and allies-in-life.

“Success isn’t final, failure isn’t fatal – it’s courage that counts,” declared Alicia Coutts, a swimmer from Australia who won five medals at the 2012 Summer Olympics. In 2012, she won the

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Australian Institute of Sport Athlete of the Year Award with sailor Tom Slingsby.

Fear paralyses and inhibits movement. An inspiring team-talk from Pep Guardiola, the Manchester City manager, was caught on camera, with the Catalan urging his players not to feel down as on 4th November 2019 they trailed 1-0 to Southampton at half-time. “Be together this game. Be together until the end,” he said. “Be positive in your minds, be positive. Be together ‘til the end. Be together, be together.” And they were. They had grit. They won.

“Never say never because limits, like fears, are often just an illusion. I know fear is an obstacle for some people, but it is an illusion to me... Failure always made me try harder next time,” declared Michael “MJ” Jeffrey Jordan. The official NBA website states that “by acclamation, Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time”. He was considered instrumental in popularising the NBA throughout the world during the 1980s and 1990s.

Risks are dangerous. However, the boxer Muhammad ‘The Greatest’ Ali reminded us that “he

who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.” Of course, it’s wise to do a risk assessment – and then crack on. Gritfully.

It’s grit that underpins resilience. “You’ve got to have the guts not to be afraid to screw up. The guys who win are the ones who are not afraid to mess up. And that comes right from the heart,” said Frank Urban ‘Fuzzy’ Zoeller Jr, an American professional golfer who won ten PGA Tour events including two major championships. He is one of only three golfers to have won the Masters Tournament in his first appearance in the event. He also won the 1984 U.S. Open, which earned him the 1985 Bob Jones Award.

“You learn you can do your best even when it’s hard, even when you’re tired and maybe hurting a little bit. It feels good to show some courage,” admitted Joseph ‘Joe’ William Namath, nicknamed ‘Broadway Joe’, a quarterback in the American Football League and National Football League during the 1960s and 1970s. In 2019, a survey conducted by the Associated Press of 60 football historians and media voted Namath the league’s greatest character.

In two weeks’ time, approaching Christmas and the new year, with its ‘new resolutions’, I shall suggest a possible – creative – resolution for the new year.