

➔ Chapter 1

SHOWING UP

By the time you set foot on the campus of the United States Military Academy at West Point, you've earned it.

The admissions process for West Point is at least as rigorous as for the most selective universities. Top scores on the SAT or ACT and outstanding high school grades are a must. But when you apply to Harvard, you don't need to start your application in the eleventh grade, and you don't need to secure a nomination from a member of Congress, a senator, or the vice president of the United States. You don't, for that matter, have to get superlative marks in a fitness assessment that includes running, push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups.

Each year, in their junior year of high school, more than 14,000 applicants begin the admissions process. This pool is winnowed to just 4,000 who succeed in getting the required nomination. Slightly more than half of those applicants—about 2,500—meet West Point's rigorous academic and physical standards, and from that select group just 1,200 are admitted and enrolled. Nearly all the men and women who come to West Point were varsity athletes; most were team captains.

And yet, one in five cadets will drop out before graduation. What's more remarkable is that, historically, a substantial fraction of dropouts

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leave in their very first summer, during an intensive seven-week training program named, even in official literature, Beast Barracks. Or, for short, just Beast.

Who spends two years trying to get into a place and then drops out in the first two months?

Then again, these are no ordinary months. Beast is described in the West Point handbook for new cadets as “the most physically and emotionally demanding part of your four years at West Point . . . designed to help you make the transition from new cadet to Soldier.”

A Typical Day at Beast Barracks

5:00 a.m.	Wake-up
5:30 a.m.	Reveille Formation
5:30 to 6:55 a.m.	Physical Training
6:55 to 7:25 a.m.	Personal Maintenance
7:30 to 8:15 a.m.	Breakfast
8:30 to 12:45 p.m.	Training/Classes
1:00 to 1:45 p.m.	Lunch
2:00 to 3:45 p.m.	Training/Classes
4:00 to 5:30 p.m.	Organized Athletics
5:30 to 5:55 p.m.	Personal Maintenance
6:00 to 6:45 p.m.	Dinner
7:00 to 9:00 p.m.	Training/Classes
9:00 to 10:00 p.m.	Commander’s Time
10:00 p.m.	Taps

The day begins at 5:00 a.m. By 5:30, cadets are in formation, standing at attention, honoring the raising of the United States flag. Then follows a hard workout—running or calisthenics—followed by a non-stop rotation of marching in formation, classroom instruction, weapons

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training, and athletics. Lights out, to a melancholy bugle song called “Taps,” occurs at 10:00 p.m. And on the next day the routine starts over again. Oh, and there are no weekends, no breaks other than meals, and virtually no contact with family and friends outside of West Point.

One cadet’s description of Beast: “You are challenged in a variety of ways in every developmental area—mentally, physically, militarily, and socially. The system will find your weaknesses, but that’s the point—West Point toughens you.”

So, who makes it through Beast?

It was 2004 and my second year of graduate school in psychology when I set about answering that question, but for decades, the U.S. Army has been asking the same thing. In fact, it was in 1955—almost fifty years before I began working on this puzzle—that a young psychologist named Jerry Kagan was drafted into the army, ordered to report to West Point, and assigned to test new cadets for the purpose of identifying who would stay and who would leave. As fate would have it, Jerry was not only the first psychologist to study dropping out at West Point, he was also the first psychologist I met in college. I ended up working part-time in his lab for two years.

Jerry described early efforts to separate the wheat from the chaff at West Point as dramatically unsuccessful. He recalled in particular spending hundreds of hours showing cadets cards printed with pictures and asking the young men to make up stories to fit them. This test was meant to unearth deep-seated, unconscious motives, and the general idea was that cadets who visualized noble deeds and courageous accomplishments should be the ones who would graduate instead of dropping out. Like a lot of ideas that sound good in principle, this one didn’t work so well in practice. The stories the cadets told were colorful and fun to listen to, but they had absolutely nothing to do with decisions the cadets made in their actual lives.

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Since then, several more generations of psychologists devoted themselves to the attrition issue, but not one researcher could say with much certainty why some of the most promising cadets routinely quit when their training had just begun.

Soon after learning about Beast, I found my way to the office of Mike Matthews, a military psychologist who's been a West Point faculty member for years. Mike explained that the West Point admissions process successfully identified men and women who had the potential to thrive there. In particular, admissions staff calculate for each applicant something called the Whole Candidate Score, a weighted average of SAT or ACT exam scores, high school rank adjusted for the number of students in the applicant's graduating class, expert appraisals of leadership potential, and performance on objective measures of physical fitness.

You can think of the Whole Candidate Score as West Point's best guess at how much talent applicants have for the diverse rigors of its four-year program. In other words, it's an estimate of how easily cadets will master the many skills required of a military leader.

The Whole Candidate Score is the single most important factor in West Point admissions, and yet it *didn't* reliably predict who would make it through Beast. In fact, cadets with the highest Whole Candidate Scores were just as likely to drop out as those with the lowest. And this was why Mike's door was open to me.

From his own experience joining the air force as a young man, Mike had a clue to the riddle. While the rigors of his induction weren't quite as harrowing as those of West Point, there were notable similarities. The most important were challenges that exceeded current skills. For the first time in their lives, Mike and the other recruits were being asked, on an hourly basis, to do things they couldn't yet do. "Within two weeks," Mike recalls, "I was tired, lonely, frustrated, and ready to quit—as were all of my classmates."

Some did quit, but Mike did not.

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What struck Mike was that rising to the occasion had almost nothing to do with talent. Those who dropped out of training rarely did so from lack of ability. Rather, what mattered, Mike said, was a “never give up” attitude.

Around that time, it wasn't just Mike Matthews who was talking to me about this kind of hang-in-there posture toward challenge. As a graduate student just beginning to probe the psychology of success, I was interviewing leaders in business, art, athletics, journalism, academia, medicine, and law: *Who are the people at the very top of your field? What are they like? What do you think makes them special?*

Some of the characteristics that emerged in these interviews were very field-specific. For instance, more than one businessperson mentioned an appetite for taking financial risks: “You’ve got to be able to make calculated decisions about millions of dollars and still go to sleep at night.” But this seemed entirely beside the point for artists, who instead mentioned a drive to create: “I like making stuff. I don’t know why, but I do.” In contrast, athletes mentioned a different kind of motivation, one driven by the thrill of victory: “Winners love to go head-to-head with other people. Winners hate losing.”

In addition to these particulars, there emerged certain commonalities, and they were what interested me most. No matter the field, the most successful people were lucky and talented. I’d heard that before, and I didn’t doubt it.

But the story of success didn’t end there. Many of the people I talked to could also recount tales of rising stars who, to everyone’s surprise, dropped out or lost interest before they could realize their potential.

Apparently, it was critically important—and not at all easy—to keep going after failure: “Some people are great when things are going well, but they fall apart when things aren’t.” High achievers described

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in these interviews really stuck it out: “This one guy, he wasn’t actually the best writer at the beginning. I mean, we used to read his stories and have a laugh because the writing was so, you know, clumsy and melodramatic. But he got better and better, and last year he won a Guggenheim.” And they were constantly driven to improve: “She’s never satisfied. You’d think she would be, by now, but she’s her own harshest critic.” The highly accomplished were paragons of perseverance.

Why were the highly accomplished so dogged in their pursuits? For most, there was no realistic expectation of ever catching up to their ambitions. In their own eyes, they were never good enough. They were the opposite of complacent. And yet, in a very real sense, they were satisfied being unsatisfied. Each was chasing something of unparalleled interest and importance, and it was the chase—as much as the capture—that was gratifying. Even if some of the things they had to do were boring, or frustrating, or even painful, they wouldn’t dream of giving up. Their passion was enduring.

In sum, no matter the domain, the highly successful had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had *direction*.

It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special. In a word, they had grit.

For me, the question became: How do you measure something so intangible? Something that decades of military psychologists hadn’t been able to quantify? Something those very successful people I’d interviewed said they could recognize on sight, but couldn’t think of how to directly test for?

I sat down and looked over my interview notes. And I started writ-

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ing questions that captured, sometimes verbatim, descriptions of what it means to have grit.

Half of the questions were about perseverance. They asked how much you agree with statements like “I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge” and “I finish whatever I begin.”

The other half of the questions were about passion. They asked whether your “interests change from year to year” and the extent to which you “have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.”

What emerged was the Grit Scale—a test that, when taken honestly, measures the extent to which you approach life with grit.

In July 2004, on the second day of Beast, 1,218 West Point cadets sat down to take the Grit Scale.

The day before, cadets had said good-bye to their moms and dads (a farewell for which West Point allocates exactly ninety seconds), gotten their heads shaved (just the men), changed out of civilian clothing and into the famous gray and white West Point uniform, and received their footlockers, helmets, and other gear. Though they may have mistakenly thought they already knew how, they were instructed by a fourth-year cadet in the proper way to stand in line (“Step up to my line! Not on my line, not over my line, not behind my line. Step up *to* my line!”).

Initially, I looked to see how grit scores lined up with aptitude. Guess what? Grit scores bore absolutely no relationship to the Whole Candidate Scores that had been so painstakingly calculated during the admissions process. In other words, how talented a cadet was said nothing about their grit, and vice versa.

The separation of grit from talent was consistent with Mike’s observations of air force training, but when I first stumbled onto this finding it came as a real surprise. After all, why *shouldn’t* the talented endure? Logically, the talented should stick around and try hard, because when

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they do, they do phenomenally well. At West Point, for example, among cadets who ultimately make it through Beast, the Whole Candidate Score is a marvelous predictor of every metric West Point tracks. It not only predicts academic grades, but military and physical fitness marks as well.

So it's surprising, really, that talent is no guarantee of grit. In this book, we'll explore the reasons why.

By the last day of Beast, seventy-one cadets had dropped out.

Grit turned out to be an astoundingly reliable predictor of who made it through and who did not.

The next year, I returned to West Point to run the same study. This time, sixty-two cadets dropped out of Beast, and again grit predicted who would stay.

In contrast, stayers and leavers had indistinguishable Whole Candidate Scores. I looked a little closer at the individual components that make up the score. Again, no differences.

So, what matters for making it through Beast?

Not your SAT scores, not your high school rank, not your leadership experience, not your athletic ability.

Not your Whole Candidate Score.

What matters is grit.

Does grit matter beyond West Point? To find out, I looked for other situations so challenging that a lot of people drop out. I wanted to know whether it was just the rigors of Beast that demanded grit, or whether, in general, grit helped people stick to their commitments.

The next arena where I tested grit's power was sales, a profession in which daily, if not hourly, rejection is par for the course. I asked hundreds of men and women employed at the same vacation time-share

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company to answer a battery of personality questionnaires, including the Grit Scale. Six months later, I revisited the company, by which time 55 percent of the salespeople were gone. Grit predicted who stayed and who left. Moreover, no other commonly measured personality trait—including extroversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness—was as effective as grit in predicting job retention.

Around the same time, I received a call from the Chicago Public Schools. Like the psychologists at West Point, researchers there were eager to learn more about the students who would successfully earn their high school diplomas. That spring, thousands of high school juniors completed an abbreviated Grit Scale, along with a battery of other questionnaires. More than a year later, 12 percent of those students failed to graduate. Students who graduated on schedule were grittier, and grit was a more powerful predictor of graduation than how much students cared about school, how conscientious they were about their studies, and even how safe they felt at school.

Likewise, in two large American samples, I found that grittier adults were more likely to get further in their formal schooling. Adults who'd earned an MBA, PhD, MD, JD, or another graduate degree were grittier than those who'd only graduated from four-year colleges, who were in turn grittier than those who'd accumulated some college credits but no degree. Interestingly, adults who'd successfully earned degrees from two-year colleges scored slightly higher than graduates of four-year colleges. This puzzled me at first, but I soon learned that the dropout rates at community colleges can be as high as 80 percent. Those who defy the odds are especially gritty.

In parallel, I started a partnership with the Army Special Operations Forces, better known as the Green Berets. These are among the army's best-trained soldiers, assigned some of the toughest and most dangerous missions. Training for the Green Berets is a grueling, multistage affair. The stage I studied comes *after* nine weeks of boot camp, four weeks of infantry training, three weeks of airborne school,

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and four weeks of a preparation course focused on land navigation. All these preliminary training experiences are very, very hard, and at every stage there are men who don't make it through. But the Special Forces Selection Course is even harder. In the words of its commanding general, James Parker, this is "where we decide who will and who will not" enter the final stages of Green Beret training.

The Selection Course makes Beast Barracks look like summer vacation. Starting before dawn, trainees go full-throttle until nine in the evening. In addition to daytime and nighttime navigation exercises, there are four- and six-mile runs and marches, sometimes under a sixty-five-pound load, and attempts at an obstacle course informally known as "Nasty Nick," which includes crawling through water under barbed wire, walking on elevated logs, negotiating cargo nets, and swinging from horizontal ladders.

Just getting to the Selection Course is an accomplishment, but even so, 42 percent of the candidates I studied voluntarily withdrew before it was over. So what distinguished the men who made it through? Grit.

What else, other than grit, predicts success in the military, education, and business? In sales, I found that prior experience helps—novices are less likely to keep their jobs than those with experience. In the Chicago public school system, a supportive teacher made it more likely that students would graduate. And for aspiring Green Berets, baseline physical fitness at the start of training is essential.

But in each of these domains, when you compare people matched on these characteristics, grit still predicts success. Regardless of specific attributes and advantages that help someone succeed in each of these diverse domains of challenge, grit matters in all of them.

The year I started graduate school, the documentary *Spellbound* was released. The film follows three boys and five girls as they prepare for and compete in the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

To get to the finals—an adrenaline-filled three-day affair staged annually in Washington, DC, and broadcast live on ESPN, which normally focuses its programming on high-stakes sports matchups—these kids must first “outspell” thousands of other students from hundreds of schools across the country. This means spelling increasingly obscure words without a single error, in round after round, first besting all the other students in the contestant’s classroom, then in their grade, school, district, and region.

Spellbound got me wondering: To what extent is flawlessly spelling words like *schottische* and *cymotrichous* a matter of precocious verbal talent, and to what extent is grit at play?

I called the Bee’s executive director, a dynamic woman (and former champion speller herself) named Paige Kimble. Kimble was as curious as I was to learn more about the psychological makeup of winners. She agreed to send out questionnaires to all 273 spellers just as soon as they qualified for the finals, which would take place several months later. In return for the princely reward of a \$25 gift card, about two-thirds of the spellers returned the questionnaires to my lab. The oldest respondent was fifteen years old, the absolute age limit according to competition rules, and the youngest was just seven.

In addition to completing the Grit Scale, spellers reported how much time they devoted to spelling practice. On average, they practiced more than an hour a day on weekdays and more than two hours a day on weekends. But there was a lot of variation around these averages: some spellers were hardly studying at all, and some were studying as much as nine hours on a given Saturday!

Separately, I contacted a subsample of spellers and administered a verbal intelligence test. As a group, the spellers demonstrated unusual verbal ability. But there was a fairly wide range of scores, with some kids scoring at the verbal prodigy level and others “average” for their age.

When ESPN aired the final rounds of the competition, I watched

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all the way through to the concluding suspenseful moments when, at last, thirteen-year-old Anurag Kashyap correctly spelled A-P-P-O-G-G-I-A-T-U-R-A (a musical term for a kind of grace note) to win the championship.

Then, with the final rankings in hand, I analyzed my data.

Here's what I found: measurements of grit taken months before the final competition predicted how well spellers would eventually perform. Put simply, grittier kids went further in competition. How did they do it? By studying many more hours and, also, by competing in more spelling bees.

What about talent? Verbal intelligence also predicted getting further in competition. But there was no relationship at all between verbal IQ and grit. What's more, verbally talented spellers did not study any more than less able spellers, nor did they have a longer track record of competition.

The separation of grit and talent emerged again in a separate study I ran on Ivy League undergraduates. There, SAT scores and grit were, in fact, inversely correlated. Students in that select sample who had higher SAT scores were, on average, just slightly less gritty than their peers. Putting together this finding with the other data I'd collected, I came to a fundamental insight that would guide my future work: *Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another.*