How Curiosity Can Take Your Performance to the Next Level

Brad: [00:00:00] You are walking up to a loaded barbell to squat 500 pounds. You're on the start line of a mile race. You're gonna try to go at a blistering pace that you never have before. You're walking in to present to the board for the first time of your new company. In all of these circumstances, you probably feel a little bit of fear, a little bit of ang. But what if the key is going into that room, going up to that barbell towing the start line, and telling yourself, brave New World. I don't know what's gonna happen, but it's gonna be interesting to find out.

Steve: This week we're gonna talk about one of the most effective performance tools you could use. No, it's not grit or sleeping more or taking some magical supplement. We're gonna talk about curiosity. This is excellence actually. I'm Steve Magnus, joined by Brad Stolberg and Clay Skipper. Let's get curious.

Clay: so we are going deep on curiosity today. One of the reasons I am particularly excited about this episode [00:01:00] is curiosity is something we've talked about a lot and and alluded to a lot on this show. It's one of those things that can be a little bit. Flimsy, I think, and hard to pin down. And so what we're gonna do today is get really concrete, right?

So we're gonna start with why curiosity matters from a neuroscience, psychology and biology standpoint, what it actually does to you. And then we're gonna get into some tools like how can you actually put curiosity to work for you to take the same approach that elite athletes often take, which is this open-ended.

Let's see what happens today. So we're gonna get into that right now. Let's start with Brave New World, Brad. 'cause I know that's a great mantra and something that's been very helpful for you. So why don't you go deeper into, um, what that is all about.

Brad: Brave New World, uh, emerged a little over six years ago when I first started getting into power lifting more seriously. And my training partner at the time, also one of my best friends in the world, Justin Boley, and I were at the gym. And we recognized that every time there was a loaded barbell [00:02:00] with more weight on it than we'd ever faced, which back then was pretty often 'cause we were both relatively new at this sport, uh, there would be a sense of fear and apprehension sometimes walking up to the barbell. Not so much because we weren't nervous that we were gonna miss the lift. You know, no one really cares if we make or miss a lift, but us, but a little bit of nerves about what it would feel like. I mean, to brace your body, to have that much weight on your back if you're squatting or to deadlift, to, to hinge at the hips and just fight gravity and, and try to pressurize your entire body so everything is tight and holding up that bar. It's a really

bizarre, uncomfortable sensation. It's kind of like the feeling that you get before going on a rollercoaster. You're excited to do it, but you're also a little bit freaked out about what it might feel like. So. One of these days, I was walking up to the bar and Justin just looked at me and he said, brave New World. And he didn't mean the book, brave New World by Al this Huxley. What he meant is that when we go up to that bar that has a weight on it more than we've ever touched before. It's a brave new world. [00:03:00] It's a new frontier. It's a new horizon. We have no idea what's gonna happen, but it sure is gonna be interesting to find out and see. And the difference between going up to that barbell. With a mindset of, can I make this lift? Or this is gonna feel uncomfortable, or trying to lie to yourself and say, I've got this. When you don't know if you have it, you've never done it before. Versus Brave new World, which really is just a stand in for, let's get curious about what might happen.

We've never done this before, is utterly transformative. 'cause if you go up there with a mindset of fear and apprehension, you're gonna be in this threat state. And there's all sorts of research that shows that when you're in a threat state, you're flooded with the stress hormone cortisol and you don't perform well. However, if you're approaching a new challenge, you don't know if you can do it, and if you tell yourself, I've got this, you're lying to yourself. You don't know if you've got this or not, and your body also knows when you're lying to yourself, you psych yourself out. It gets in the way. But if you go into a challenge, curious to find out what the hell's gonna happen, excited to see. That really opens you [00:04:00] up, one, to be truthful to yourself, and two, to get the most out of yourself. So that's what Brave New World means. Now, obviously, brave New World is not just about approaching a barbell or the squat rack, right? As I said, an opening, you could be giving a public speech, brave New World.

You could be having your first child and that thing comes out and you're thinking, oh shit, what do we get into Brave New World? It's anytime you're facing a new challenge that you're excited about, but you feel those nerves and apprehension, you wanna shift that mindset. To a place of curiosity and Brave New World is just this wonderful mantra to help you do it because at the end of the day, I don't know if I'm gonna make the lift or not. We don't know what it's like to have a child for the first time. We don't know what it's like to speak in front of a room for 2000 people. If you haven't done it before, you're going into your first case. As a medical resident, you don't know what it's gonna be like, but you can be really curious to explore and find out. You feel your best. You perform your best.

Clay: So before we get further, let's go into a little bit of the science here. Steve, can you, can you take us into the science of what actually happens when we get curious?[00:05:00]

Steve: do it, and to get there, I want to outline an experience that is familiar to every single parent out there. Your toddler or baby is melting down, whatever happened, there's pure panic, crying, sometimes even rage, where they're just throwing a tantrum, throwing

themselves on the floor, and you're thinking, oh dear God, how do I get them out of this? And if they're young enough, what often works is if you dangle those keys in front of them or get them to a light switch where they can turn it on and off, and all of a sudden that tantrum flips from, oh, dear God, the world is ending to. Oh wow. This light goes on and off. When I flip this switch and what you've done is activate or switch those pathways that you just mentioned.

According to neuroscientists, Jan Pinks up, he found that there's seven emotional. Kind of networks or pathways that include [00:06:00] things like seeking rage, fear, lust, care, grief and other things. And what he discovered is that you essentially can't have both pathways to seeking and the rage or fear pathway on at the same time. So if you're experiencing that meltdown and your rage and fear is going crazy, if you can get curious. Inactivate that seeking pathway, your brain kind of flips. The other thing that's really interesting here that, um, occurs as well. Is that that curiosity broaden into our worldview. So often what happens when we're in that fear or rage sense, we narrow on the threat before us.

We see that barbell in our brain goes, oh dear God, this is so heavy. How in the world am I gonna lift this? If I don't lift this, my lifting partners are gonna think I'm on, I'm weak. How am I gonna send that video to Steve if I'm Brad, if I don't make the lift? You start to panic, you start to freak out. It narrows your world on the threat.[00:07:00]

Curiosity is expansive. It broadens us out. It allows us to say, okay, I'm going into new, new, new area on the map. I don't know exactly what I'm gonna experience, but let's see what's there. And even if I fail, that's new information to utilize.

Brad: I think there's one more important thing to mention, which is, yes, Steve's giving me a hard time, but even if I don't really care if I make a lift or not, like I'm not a pro athlete, right?

The only people that are watching me lift is me and who's ever in the gym. The feeling of discomfort itself can raise that th threat alarm. Ancient wisdom traditions have known this long before neuroscience. So clay, you are the the most expert meditator amongst all of us. And when you're sitting in meditation and you feel pain or an uncomfortable sensation, what is like one of the first teachings to do?

Clay: Investigate it. Get curious about it.

Brad: Get curious about it. And no one cares that you're feeling pain. You're not even allowed to talk on these retreats. So no one possibly knows that you're [00:08:00] feeling pain, but. This subtle shift in mindset from, oh no, this hurts. Or, how long is this gonna last? Or, I'm uncomfortable to, let me get curious about this.

Pain completely changes your experience of the moment, and you start to realize that the pain isn't static, it's changing. It's a process. Sometimes it hurts more, sometimes it hurts less. Sometimes the pain doesn't even hurt as bad. You're freaking out about the pain. So to Steve's point, you go from really narrowed and fixated on discomfort to more broad in exploring and investigating, and it just gives you so many more degrees of freedom. Now, this is important not just when you're sitting cross-legged in a silent room where you're not allowed to talk for 10 days. It's important when you go on that stage or when you're on the start line of race or any other situation where there's a tendency to hyper fixate on the discomfort that you're about to face. Shifting to a mindset of, I don't know what's gonna happen, but let's find out, is just incredibly freeing. There's this wonderful quote [00:09:00] from Kobe Bryant, absolute killer on the basketball court, right? We know this mamba mentality. And Kobe Bryant was asked in an interview if he's the kind of player that plays not to lose or that plays to win. And you know how he answered that question? He said, I'm neither. I play to figure things out. I play to learn. That's the definition of curiosity. He went on to say that if you play not to lose, you're driven by fear. And fear can be narrowing, it can be scary. And if you play to win and you don't win, well then you're gonna think that you're a failure.

And that can be scary. But if you play to figure things out, the world is yours. It's open, it's joyful, it's playful. So even a player that is known for having the utmost killer mentality. Went onto the court every night, not with an attitude of I need to win or not with an attitude of I can't lose, but with an attitude of shit.

A final, let's figure this out. Let's see how to play the game.

Clay: Yeah. I want to underline this point because I think [00:10:00] we talk a lot about the importance of confidence and approaching things with a certain level of self-belief, right? And I think someone who listened to this could be like. Okay, well what about someone who does set out to prove something? Right? I, I think of someone who's like maybe not approaching a performance with curiosity as someone who has a chip on their shoulder.

Right. And is like, I need to prove to everyone that I'm the best. Um, and that can be an effective approach, up to a point, I think. Right. But I think if you can actually shift from that, I'm gonna prove you wrong. To, let's see how good I can be. That can be a powerful approach. So I think you need this like dual sort of like two tools, one of which is confidence, which comes from self-belief.

That's like putting in the work, right? Practicing getting the technique now, getting proficient at whatever it is you're doing so that you can approach the starting line or approach the presentation or [00:11:00] performance, whatever with this confidence. But then when you get to the starting line, you sort of have to shift to this curiosity of.

I'm not necessarily out to prove anything, or even if I am out to prove something, I still want to go in with like, let's see how good I can be. And so then the question becomes, okay, how do we train that muscle? How do we train like the curiosity and if confidence comes from putting in the work, doing the, doing the practice, putting in the reps.

I think the curiosity comes from a combination of. Emotional regulation, learning how to regulate your emotions such that when you fail you don't beat yourself up. Right. And this, and like psychological flexibility, that idea of like creating a little space between stimulus and response so that, so if people are like, how do I get more confidence?

You put in the work, how do I get better at curiosity? I think it comes from this combination of like working with difficult emotions. You have to fail so that you learn how to actually be with the failure and get. Better at being like talking to yourself in a calm manner rather than a, than a threatening manner.

And give yourself some kindness and compassion, forgiveness, accountability, but still these other aspects [00:12:00] as well. And when you combine those two, I think that's when athletes like really unlock something special, right? Because you have the confidence and the self-belief, but you also have this like, if I fail, I'm gonna be okay.

As opposed to if I fail, I'm gonna be so screwed. And that fear is where you can really get into like some, uh, some bad traps, I think.

Steve: so this is where I think Michael Jordan did everybody a disservice because. What do people remember of Michael Jordan? The chip on his shoulder that everybody's insulting me. Then I'm gonna prove everybody wrong. The, you know, my high school basketball coach cut me, uh, my sophomore year and I'm gonna carry that through the rest of my career and lambast him on the Hall of Fame speech.

That's what we remember. The problem with that approach is exactly what you identified there, clay, for 99.9% of people, what does that do? It surfaces some of that fear. That I have to prove people, [00:13:00] and if I don't, that means I'm not worthy. Now, Michael Jordan might have been able to get away with it on the basketball court, not so much.

Maybe in other endeavors in in his life, but most of us can't because it tips the balance towards fear, towards avoidance, towards like feeling the pressure and anxiety, which tends to narrow us and make us kind of choke instead of perform at a high level. I think what you're getting at is the nuance that both Kobe Bryant is getting at and that most high performers do, is that we need this duality of tools. I was talking to a, um, a professional actress who put it like this. She said, in the dress rehearsal up to the thing, I need to over prepare. Be meticulous, have almost that chip on my shoulder that I need to prove that I'm here. And then once the lights go on. I need to let it [00:14:00] all go and get curious about the scene and the person and the the people sitting across from me and just trust

that I can do the thing. And I think for the vast majority of people, that's where it comes into it. Brad isn't saying like, Hey, go walk up to the bar and say Brave New World, and see what happens. He's saying, no, train your ass off. And then when you're tackling something that puts a little bit of fear into you because you haven't gone there before, you're not sure if you can lift the bar, then to take that fear down a little bit. You go get curious, you go explore. You give yourself permission to fail essentially. And ironically, that frees you up to do the thing. Instead of going to the bar and saying, I have to lift this, and if I don't lift this, I'm a failure. Very few people perform at their best in that state.

Clay: The reason I like that so much is because I heard an, uh, another actor talking the other day and they were [00:15:00] talking about how in rehearsal they, everything they're doing is reacting. You're sort of like just reading the script, right?

And the person has what they say and you react with your line. And, and then they're like, but when I'm actually acting, that's when I'm responding. And like the, and that, and I love it. 'cause we obviously talk about like respond, don't react all the time. And it lines up perfectly with what you just said, Steve, which is like in rehearsal you're just saying the lines.

But then in the actual act of acting, if you're doing it in the right way, you're responding sort of like thoughtfully, constructively from a place of open-endedness rather than just following the script.

Brad: Yeah. I mean, all these things point at the same truth, right? This is no different than the the four models of competence where conscious competence, you're thinking deliberately, you're trying really hard. Comes before unconscious competence, which is when you let go in, in, you say Brave new world, and you go and you be curious.

I think it's worth taking listeners behind the scenes a little bit, um, for some nuance because Steve and I this morning had a, had a really good conversation about this topic from a slightly [00:16:00] different angle, uh, very much related to our newsletter this week. So if you haven't yet, read the newsletter.

Read the newsletter. If you're not subscribed to the newsletter, subscribe to the newsletter. It comes out every week. It's great. We'll put it in the show notes. This week's newsletter, we talk about the pitcher, Troy Melton. Troy Melton got his first MLB playoff start for the Detroit Tigers. He's 24 years old on the road in Seattle, a super hostile environment, and he was doing great through four innings.

The game is zero zero and then in the fourth he's facing the thick of the Mariners lineup and they're really good and he gets absolutely rocked for a home run. And then the next batter he faces, he gets absolutely rocked again. The only thing that saves him is the maritime air of Seattle. I mean, this ball was caught inches away from being outta the

park. No real estate left on that warning track. And the camera crew goes to Melton, the pitcher, and you might expect for him to have his glove in his face or his shoulders [00:17:00] hunched over what's on Melton's face. He's got a grin from ear to ear that makes him look like the Joker in the Batman movie. And in that moment, what Melton is. Probably saying to himself is some version of the odds are against me. I'm a rookie on the road facing the best lineup in baseball. I've made it four innings. That guy just rocked me and I just got really lucky. Fuck it. Like let it rip. And then he went back to dealing heat. And I think that this is so important because earlier I mentioned the difference between a performance approach and a performance avoidance mindset. A performance approach mindset is, again, when you're playing to win, you're open, you're expansive. A performance avoidance mindset is when you're playing not to lose.

You're fearful. Now to Clay's point, if you have earned the confidence and you're really good and you have reason to believe that you're gonna win. Then you can adopt a performance approach mindset [00:18:00] relatively easily. But if you're Troy Melton and you're facing the Mariners, you'd be lying to yourself.

Like odds are you are gonna get rocked in that situation. So then the question becomes how do you stay open? How do you stay free even in a situation where the odds are truly against you? And this is where I think that that brave new world, that fuck it, let it rip whatever the mantra is. If it just helps you be playful and and be curious goes such a long way because it shifts you into that playing to win attitude even when perhaps the ads are against you. And I called Steve and I told him this and I said, you know, edit the newsletter, all this, add your own stuff, blah, blah, blah. And then Steve says, yeah, but you know what's gonna happen? And I said, what? He's like, people are gonna hear this and they're gonna think, oh sweet, I've done no training. I can just go pitch in game three of the A LCS.

And Brad said, fuck it, let it rip. Like I [00:19:00] can just let it go. And you know, kind of like the let them theory. Next thing you know, we'll have the fuck it. Let it rip theory. And people that have done no work will say, well, Brad said, even when the odds are against me, all I have to do is say F it, let it rip and then I'll be fine. And that's where the nuance comes in. Like Troy Melton did a shit ton of work to get to that place, but then when he's there, whether the odds are against him or not, you kind of have to flip that switch and say like, I'm just gonna give it a whirl. And you have that smile of a joker and you don't end up happening. Melton went on to get the next six outs. Tigers 1, 3, 2.

Clay: Also, you gotta develop the skill. I feel like, like sometimes you are not going to be able to get curious and you just fail and you fall flat on your face. And as comedians say, you learn to love the bomb. Right? Some of the stuff you can't think your way into, you have to have the experience, right? And so some of this.

Is just getting used to failing. Feeling how much it sucks. Berating yourself, if that's your tendency, learning how to be a little bit softer and over time like getting used to failure such that you're not so scared of it. [00:20:00] Right. Some of this you can't just like flip a switch and do it. Takes some experience.

Steve: I, I think you're spot on. And I think what it is, clay, is we talk about these things and people think like, oh, I'm just gonna say Brave New world, and I'll be good.

Clay: Yes.

Steve: But the reality is that activates a mindset or approach to the thing that you have

practiced and that you have trained and that you have developed. One of my favorite stories of this is actually from the skateboarder, Tony Hawk, who was like struggling to get the 900 trick that defined him for a while, and one of his fellow skateboarders came to him one day and said, risk not winning. Which means like Tony Hawk was the best of the best at this time.

He had all the video games, all the stuff, right. But he was, his friend was giving him permission. Like, it's okay. Like. Don't try to be perfect, like be okay failing, I think sometimes one of the [00:21:00] tools is exactly what you identified there, clay, which is your relationship with losing or failure, is often the thing that keeps you from being curious.

Because if you build failure up, if you build losing up to be this big existential thing, then even if you tell your brain, brave new world, like, F it, let's go. Your brain's gonna be like, no, no, Brad. Because if you lose this, you think your parents or coach or whoever are gonna hate you, and that is hard to overcome.

So often we have to have to set the stage with, it's not just like saying the things. It's creating the tools, it's creating the environment where you have coaches, parents, teachers, whoever, who understand that it's okay to take risks sometimes and fall short and then learn and grow from it versus, you know, the, maybe the old school teacher who just bere or parent who just berates you, um, and instills like this avoidance mindset. So I think it's like all of these things coming [00:22:00] together is you need to have the permission. The tools to be able to utilize them.

Brad: And I think the genuine self-confidence, and this is the thing that, um. I do think that you, you just, you have to earn, and it tends to be hard won. You know, if I miss that lift, like I've still got my family that loves me. I still got my friends, I still got my craft of writing. Like it's, it's, I'll be fine. Uh, 10 years ago maybe I would've put more pressure on myself. And to Clay's point, I've missed a lot of lifts and, and that that's true literally and metaphorically. And every time you miss a lift and you freak out and you realize that the

world's not gonna end. You have a much easier time learning to laugh at the pressure that you put on yourself. And it doesn't mean that you don't wanna win or you don't wanna make the lift or hit the best seller list or get the promotion or you know, get the next round of funding any less. You just can hold it a little bit more lightly because you've learned [00:23:00] that the world doesn't end if you don't get it. And the great paradox of that is for 99.99, nine 9% of people, you actually end up performing better by holding the thing a little bit more lightly.

Steve: But part of that

again is have you been there before? Not at that

exact thing, but have you been able to take that shot? Right. So I'll, I'll give you an example from my own life. Okay. My senior of high school, most people, most listeners know, ran a 4 0 1 mile. What they don't know is I came into that season with a four 17 Best, which is a long way from 4 0 1.

Okay?

Long way. Okay? But that first race. Of my senior year, I went out in 60 seconds for the first lap, which is four minute mile pace, maybe it was dumb. I slowed down a bunch of the second lap and the third lap, but I ended up running, I don't know, a PR four 13, the race after that, I was like, well. I've gone out in [00:24:00] 60, so why don't I just do it again? And then my cut time came down to like 4 0 8, then it went down to 4 0 6, then to 4 0 4, then all the way down to 4 0 1. And literally, I wouldn't suggest this to everyone, but literally for every race that year, the first lap was always the freaking same. And the point was. Every race. I was able to go a little bit further into the unknown of that 62nd pace, where maybe the first time it was only 400, the next time 600, the next time 800, and I die at some point. But at some point I stopped dying and I just held 60 point the whole way. But the only way I had the confidence to do that was A, through a lot of training, but also B of being like, you know what? I've been, I've been most of the, the way here. Like, let's see what happens and go a little bit further. And no one yelled at me that I fell apart.

They said, Hey, you made it a little further at this point. And I think that same analogy applies to [00:25:00] other things in life where. You can't just show up to game seven of the whatever championships and say, okay, now's the time to flip the switch. If you haven't flipped that. Switch in lower stakes environments before you. So this is where, you know, practice and. In competitions, we, we call it, you know, preseason or regular season games or competitions that don't quite matter enough as much where we've gotta like be, have the permission to not be perfect to but to go explore and see what happens a little bit. I.

Clay: I love that. I wanna bring it to a previous guest of the show. Someone we, I, I bring up a lot because I really admire her, but Courtney De Walter and she recently, um, uploaded an Instagram talking about how she has the same pre-race feelings at age 14 she has at 40. And one of those feelings is she says, I'm curious because it'll test me in ways I can't predict.

Right? And so I think, Steve, to your points. It's like cultivating. I'm sure she's, [00:26:00] she said she had it at 14. That's pretty amazing. But I'm sure she's better at it now than she was at 14 because she's been cultivating it for, what is that, 26 years. Um, and when we, we spoke to her on the podcast, she said when she first signed up, you know, Courtney, if people don't know and.

One of the greatest ultra runners of all time. She's run at every distance. She's, she's been great. Um, certainly at a hundred miles. And she was talking about, she, you know, she ran cross country and did skiing in high school, but she didn't run a road marathon until like after she graduated college, I think.

And she said it was purely, I'm quoting her now. It was purely curiosity driven. I'd just seen all these people do these road marathons and insane sounding distances. I was curious, could I, could I be a person who finishes a road marathon? And then she says she just kept. She kept doing that. She said, and again, I'm quoting her here.

Okay. I did that. I finished it. She kept going longer distances I didn't think I could. So what's another thing I can try that I'm not sure I can make it to the finish line of, and like that phrasing specifically I think is so. Built around curiosity. It's not, [00:27:00] she started out with what can I do? But now she, she got further and further by asking like, what am I not sure that I can do?

Right? And it's hovering right on that outside line of where the comfort zone becomes the like discomfort zone before you get to the stress and and breakdown zone. And. She's gotten very good at cultivating this ability to like go just outside the comfort zone into this curious zone and, and expand that outward, right?

I don't know if you guys played this, but there's this game I played as a kid called Age of, uh, empires, and basically you, you are, you own, you like build this empire and you have this little map. At the beginning, you start in the middle of the map and you have a little bit of light on the map that you've explored.

And as you go further and further, the outer reaches, you get more and more light into the dark areas, right? And that's sort of what this is. That curiosity allows you to start with this like little circle of light in the middle of the square map. And you just go out and you discover a little bit more of the forest, you expand your empire a little bit more, right?

And you come back to your home base, but then you keep doing that and eventually over time. You've, [00:28:00] uh, scoured the entire map.

Steve: I love that Clay. I am gonna have to, teenage Steve playing Age of Empires is all about that. But you know what a, a great example of this is actually Courtney Dewal just showed us this this weekend as we're recording this, is she ran the Twin Cities Marathon. And ran relatively fast. I mean, she's, uh, I think 40 41 ran two 40 something in the marathon. She's stepping out of the thing that she's great at. A hundred milers, 200 milers long trail stuff and saying, you know what? Screw it. Let's go line up for a road marathon. That is gonna be way too fast for what she's been trained for, and let's stick her nose in it. Know that she probably won't win. I think she ended up eighth or ninth and see what's there. That's the perfect, example again of going maybe outside of the comfort zone of just go longer and she's going faster. Saying, you know what? Who cares if I get beat? This is me following [00:29:00] my curiosity to see what I'm capable of and sticking me in a new situation. And I think as we age, we often forget that, right?

We stick in our little comfort zone, which de trains our ability to kind of flip that switch and say, Hey, here's somewhere I haven't explored on this map. Let's go see if there's, uh, some evil empire that's gonna invade us over in this little black area.

Brad: It comes down to can you get over yourself and stop taking yourself so damn seriously and get over your ego that's constantly worried about protecting yourself. And essentially say, yeah, I want this really bad, but I'm not sure if I'm gonna get it. So brave New World. For those that are more explicit, fuck it. Let's go find out. This does not work if you don't have some sort of strong foundation of like genuine safety. So if you run that marathon and if you don't get under a [00:30:00] two 40, someone's gonna take your family or your house away from you. It's very hard just to get curious. You're gonna be in this scarcity threat mindset. However, if your basic needs are met and you're freaking out about the promotion or you're gonna make the team or whatever, I get it, that's fine. I've been there. We're all there. But that gets in your way. The more that you can say like, shit, if I know if I'm gonna make this team, but let's go find out.

The better off you'll perform. But that does require taking yourself a little bit less seriously. Um, and that's really hard and. To go back to like the paradox and the non-duality. We're not saying don't take the work seriously. To Steve's point, when you're training, you wanna be exacting, pay attention to the details, nail your process, you know, really get in there. But on race day, like, leave all that behind and just let it rip. And it's so freeing for people that hold on so tight and, and I do think that that's the power of a mantra, like Brave New [00:31:00] World or just something that kind of reminds you. Like, I don't know what's gonna happen, but like, damn, if I'm not gonna try to find out and see.

Steve: I think another place where this really shows up is when things are going wrong. Where we kind of enter like, what's the point or why try mode? The example I like to give here is, you know, when I was coaching college athletes, you'd see someone just struggling in a, in a cross country race, and you can just see it on their face.

It's like they're trying, they care, but it's going poorly. So their brain is just like. Just check out, like, just stop. Like put yourself out of the misery, right? And what would often work in those situations? As the coach on the sideline, I'm sitting there being like, oh, oh, what in the world do I say to get this kid out of this space and salvage this is, you'd yell at that, that guy or girl, and you say, Hey, F it. You're not gonna hit your goal. You're not gonna run your pr. I just want to see [00:32:00] how many people you can catch in the last mile. And all you've done is you've shifted this from like, the goal is blocking you. That failure, you already know you're not gonna, you know, win the race, get the pr, do the thing. It's like this roadblock for your brain telling you what's the point, why try, and instead you shift it towards a acceptance, acknowledging. It sucks. I can't do anything about that. But B, like I can almost play at it. Like there's still some sort of curiosity here. Like I can still see if maybe I can out kick some people or catch these random people from the school that I hate or whatever it is that allows you to. Often reengage on the thing that you're pursuing and it ends in a not perfect race or performance, but one where you can walk away and be like, you know what? That wasn't God awful. I can learn from it. I can build upon it.

Clay: Yeah, and I [00:33:00] think you gotta figure out what, what, like makes this curiosity switch turn on for you because I think you'll appreciate this story, Steve and, and Brad, but it's, it relates to a, a track athlete of my own. When I was coaching track, this is one of the, the strongest runners on the team. He's just gotten better and better.

He is a, a two miler and a and a miler. And he came up to me before one meet and he is like, coach. When I'm in the last 600 meters, I want you to scream at me. Like let it hurt. He's like, 'cause when I, when it starts to hurt, I like feel a resistance. And I need someone when I'm in that sort of like oxen debt and not thinking to be like, go into the sensations of the pain.

'cause that's, that's what motivates him. He likes it. But to go back to Brad, what you were saying about like in meditation, they tell you to get curious about sensation and what you're actually feeling like for this kid that worked for him right. To, to be like, let it hurt. What does the hurt feel like?

Like go into that, that actually worked for him. That's not gonna work for a lot of people, right? Like I think Courtney DeWalt is the type of person that, that works for her, that works for this kid. It may not work for you, [00:34:00] but it's that, that idea of like, okay, can you practice? How do I turn on my curiosity muscle in, in low stakes environments as we, as we said, so that you get used to like what flips that switch for you so that when it

comes to high stakes, high pressure moments, you can then know how to, how to switch it on.

Brad: And I would argue though that it. And this is an interesting point of contention or debate. I have no data for this, Steve. Maybe you've seen data that I haven't. I'd argue that at the the best, your own personal best, so hitting your own ceiling and whatever it is you do, you do have to kind of get comfortable with letting it hurt. Like you've be willing to go in and explore whatever you're feeling, whether it's anxiety before presentation, whether it's pain during a race, whether it's discomfort when you're, you're lifting weight. Um. There's obviously this tool of like external, uh, focus where, you know, you listen to the, the music or you pay attention to the sounds or you try to find five things around you.

And I think like those are all good [00:35:00] tools. And again, I don't have data, but I think like to really get the best outta yourself, you've just gotta say like, this is it, this is what I'm feeling. I'm gonna go into the pain and I'm just gonna, I'm gonna tighten that screwdriver as tight as I can get it and see what I can get outta myself. And that is cognitively and emotionally and psychologically demanding. You can't do it every time, but I just think there's a time and a place to like go to the well and bury yourself. And when you do it, the more that you can be curious as you're doing it, the the better off you'll be.

Steve: And so I think this is where performance is so fascinating because I do agree in principle, Brad, where it's like you just gotta go towards it. But the crazy things that some of your best performance is with that mindset, you're like, go towards the pain. It doesn't hurt at all. Right? You, you have these races where you're like, I know it's supposed to hurt.

I can't go any faster. But I'm literally just like in the zone clicking it off and like.

Brad: Yeah, it's

Steve: You. It's magic. And I [00:36:00] think the mistake people make is they think, oh, I perform in best when it's magic, and then they expect magic. You don't get to magic by expecting magic. You get to magic by saying, I'm prepared. This is gonna hurt. I'm gonna go to the hurt. And then you magically find yourself in this place. You're like. Oh, it doesn't hurt. And then instead of like freaking out because it doesn't hurt, you stay curious. You're just like, let's ride it baby. Let's, let's, let's roll. So it's like this weird part of performance where our brain sometimes all tricks us, and I experienced this so often as a coach, where a kid would have one of these breakthrough races and they'd be like, coach, it didn't hurt.

I can go so much faster. And then next time they'd expect it to not hurt and they'd blow the F up. Then they'd often not perform well because every race they're expecting and not

to hurt if I can just get in that zone. So I think from a base point, absolutely you gotta expect it to hurt and you gotta expect, Hey, I know how to deal with this. The [00:37:00] other thing that I'd add, clay, is I think, I think you're spot on on saying you've gotta learn and understand how to develop tools to like flip that switch. No matter what comes at you. So for example, when I'm running a race and I'm getting curious, sometimes that's like, Hey, I'm gonna explore this pain or this feeling. Sometimes it's like Brad said to externalize it and say, you know what? There are 10 people in front of me. I'm gonna get, I'm gonna see if I can catch that pack and just like narrow my vision on that person. And s and forget about everybody else in the race and just like. Almost get curious on like, I've got 400 meters, can I do this?

Right? And I think there's a lot of different ways where you can kind of like learn how to, to flip that, that switch. But the way you do that isn't that there's some magic tool that you pull out that works for everybody. It's literally being in practice in the arena [00:38:00] and trying all this crazy different stuff until you realize like, okay, you know. Most of the time this works. So I'm gonna try this this time. And if it doesn't, you know what? Then instead of like focusing narrowly on the person ahead of me, I'm just gonna like say F it. Like I'm gonna kick hard for 200 meters even though I've got 400 left and I'm gonna see if I run outta gas. And you just like change things until you find something that works.

Brad: The magic is always a byproduct of doing the fundamentals correctly. And if you expect the magic to happen or you try to force the magic, it never happens. So the magic always comes when you think it's gonna be really hard, and then it's just not. Uh, I'm, I'm shocked that I'm the one bringing it back to mindfulness meditation.

But when I first started meditating, I don't know, 10 years ago, um. I distinctly remember having this moment where I just felt, it sounds so cliche, but I felt like one with everything. I'm like, I don't know if I believe in [00:39:00] God or whatever, but like there is a loving force in the universe and I'm a part of it.

And, uh, I, I no longer exist as I, I'm just like a wave in the ocean and this is the most beautiful thing and I'm being held by the whole ocean. And Judson Brewer, who was teaching me how to meditate at the time. And I remember I called Judson. And I'm just like, wow, like, let's talk about this.

Let's deconstruct it all this. And, and Judson just said, forget about it. He's like, what'd you eat for lunch? I'm like, what? He's like, yeah, I don't wanna talk about it. Like, what'd you eat for lunch? And his whole point was like, that experience, that's just a byproduct. Like if you get attached to that, then the, like, you're not practicing anymore, right.

Then like you're trying to force something. Like you're, you're literally, the whole point of meditation is to learn how to non-judgmentally observe and not become attached to

anything. And that experience is no different than making a Turkey sandwich for lunch. And it's hard to wrap your head around it.

But having this conversation, I come back and I think of that. Because in [00:40:00] all elements of my life, whenever I've put a lot of pressure on myself to have something be magical, it's never magical. But when I go into something, expecting it to be hard and really curious about it, those are the times that the magic happens.

Clay: Yeah, it is. They have a great term for this in mindfulness, right? They call it beginner's mind. Uh, I was gonna bring this up earlier when you said you're the, you're the mindfulness expert here. I was gonna be like, well, I, I resist that for, for many reasons I've won. I don't think I am. But also the, the beginner's mind is the, the quote

Brad: not supposed to resist in meditation? You just can't win with this sport.

Clay: It's true. It's true. I believe it's from Han Ru Suzuki, but he says, in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the experts there are a few, and it's exactly what. Judson was getting at, right? He's like, if you now go into the next meditation and you hope, if you hope to ha recreate this magic, you may not find it.

But if you just go in with the beginner's mind of like, let's see what happens, cur again, curiosity, there it is coming up again. Then you can, every experience can be new. Right? And that's, that's I think a lot of what we're getting at here. Whether or not you're, you know, you're going to a basketball game, you're going to a [00:41:00] presentation.

You've done the work, you've put in tons of reps, you're, you're, you know, you're gonna, your next triathlon. Awesome. You probably have some expectations of what it's gonna be like, but go with a little bit of playfulness if you can, a little bit of curiosity and see what happens rather than trying to drive it to a specific, uh, conclusion or make reality line up with your expectations.

Brad: Last very practical tool for listeners, uh, because it, it's just that it's very practical. There is some research that shows that when you are in a challenging situation, and you might be feeling all the, the feelings that we talked about, apprehensive, restless, anxious. Nervous, fearful. Instead of labeling those feelings as something bad is fear or is restlessness or anxiety, for instance, just pay attention to the sensations in your body and just say, oh, I feel some tightness, or I feel some warmth, or I feel my palms are sweating. And then if you can tell yourself that this is just my body's natural stress response and I'm about to [00:42:00] expose myself to stress, and this is my body, getting ready for the challenge and priming itself to perform. Then you end up performing better. And this has been studied in athletes, it's been studied in elite swimmers, it's been studied in public speaking.

So there are pretty robust findings across domains and it, it is a really powerful tool. And again, it takes practice. So the first time you feel really anxious, you can't just say, oh, I'm not anxious, I'm excited. But if you do it over and over again and you combine it with brave New world in that mindset and you just keep practicing it and you keep putting yourself out there, you keep stepping into the arena and taking on these challenges. Eventually curiosity starts to become your default aptitude and you can really access it. Like it, it's just reps. It's like anything else. And when you access it, like you feel better and you perform better. So it, it really is a superpower tool for performance.

Clay: Because you gave such a great mantra, Brad, I, and you're giving you, you know, I think Brave New World is super helpful before [00:43:00] something, and during something, I think another mantra that's great 'cause we talked about earlier sort of dealing with the. Dealing with failure and bouncing back and building resilience.

A mantra that we've talked about on here before, I think I got it from you, Brad. I found it very helpful is maybe, maybe not right. So say you, you say you try Brave New World and it absolutely flops and you blow up and, and um, you know, you're thinking, God, what are these guys saying on this podcast? I went with Brave New World and it didn't work out right, and you're beating yourself up for the failure.

You say maybe, maybe not. Right? And what it means is maybe, maybe all these stories about how it was a failure and how it's gonna be so bad next time are true, but maybe not. Maybe this failure that you're learning to deal with this time is what makes you able to do better next time. Right. And so in the moment, after something in the, in that time when the sort of inner critic can get loud, this idea of like.

Life is long perform. Hopefully the performance life people listen to this podcast is long. We don't know what results are necessarily gonna mean. Right? How they, whether they're good or bad over the [00:44:00] long course of a career. So just that idea of like maybe, maybe not allows you to hold on a little less tightly to it was a success or a failure.

Okay.

Brad: The reason it works is because it's accurate. We don't know

what's gonna happen. We like, we clinging to certainty.

We don't know. And

I don't know, maybe, maybe not. Like, it's just, it, it's, it's being honest with yourself and it's, it's, it, it is not ignoring the importance of preparation and confidence and evidence in owning your seats, but it's realizing that you can do all of that. And if you're appropriately

challenging yourself, you're still gonna put yourself in positions where you don't know the outcome. And there's no point in lying to yourself. So why don't you just say, shit, if I like, I keep saying it like maybe, maybe not. Let's find out and then you let her rip.

Clay: If people wanna go deeper on tools, we did a, if I may say so, without sounding like an arrogant. Dick, uh, I think we did a great episode a few, a few episodes ago about tools for navigating discomfort. That one was pretty chockfull of, [00:45:00] uh, not necessarily for curiosity specifically, but in terms of like dealing with difficult things, hard things, whether that be, um, physical performance or just dealing with, you know, emotional difficulty in life.

That is a great episode to go back and listen to. If you've enjoyed this episode, please send it to. Someone you care about. Someone, it could be someone you don't care about, who you wanna care about 'cause you wanna get them better at curiosity. One thing we're curious about is how big we can grow this show.

And that really helps if you support us by sharing this with 1, 2, 3 people, colleagues, family members, friends, um, who you think will also benefit from hearing it. So that's all for today. Any final closing words, fellas? Take that as a no. So we'll be back next week with another episode. As always, take care of yourselves and be excellent to each other.