



GREG HARDEN

**STAY SANE**  
**IN AN INSANE WORLD**

HOW TO CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES AND THRIVE

FOREWORD BY

**TOM BRADY**

SEVEN-TIME  
SUPER BOWL  
CHAMPION

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## PRAISE FOR GREG HARDEN

“Greg Harden has and will always be one of the most influential people in my life.”

—Tom Brady,  
Super Bowl MVP

“I. Can’t. Wait!!!”

—Michael Phelps,  
twenty-three-time Olympic Gold Medalist

“If Greg Harden wasn’t at the University of Michigan, I don’t win the Heisman.”

—Desmond Howard,  
Heisman Trophy winner

“I highly recommend this book as a must-read. Greg and I have worked together since my days as a player at Michigan and now as a head coach for the Wolverines. He has been instrumental in creating championship cultures in and out of sports.”

—Jim Harbaugh,  
University of Michigan Football Coach

“Greg Harden and our work together saved my life.”

—Samantha Arsenault Livingstone,  
Olympic Gold Medalist

“He’s a miracle worker. He made me a better coach and a better person.”

—Bob Bowman,  
swimming coach to Michael Phelps

# STAY SANE IN AN INSANE WORLD

GREG HARDEN  
WITH STEVE HAMILTON



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is *not* a conventional “how-to” book with a systematic, step-by-step formula detailing what you must do to be rich and successful.

This book will require you to *think* and to find for yourself the specific stories and pieces of advice that you can relate to. *You* must identify the chapters that genuinely teach your mind and your heart. I’m asking you to explore and to find a story, a phrase—*anything* that you can latch on to—and then let it help you become the person you’ve always dreamed of becoming.

One of the most important things that I emphasize and teach is that if your life is going to work, it will be because of your decision-making, your ability to have healthy relationships, and your ability to recognize and take total control over those things you can control.

It has been uniquely exciting to work with a lot of seventeen- to twenty-three-year-olds throughout my career and to challenge each of them to let the adolescent child start taking a back seat to the young adult. Trying to convince them that if you want to be the best, you have to develop yourself in more than just one area. Imagine the challenge. I have this student in my office and I’m trying to explain that the best way to become a better *athlete* is to become a better *person*.

Of course, it’s the same truth for anyone, at any age, in any walk of life. You can’t become the best sales rep, the best manager, the best parent, the best spouse, the best *anything*, until you become the best *person* you can possibly be.

It’s a tough sell sometimes, but I’ve learned that I have to push people to understand that we all come with certain baggage. We all have our own stories in our lives, of where we came from, hardships or trauma we’ve endured, people we’ve known, loved, or lost. I’ve known so many winners, champions, All-American this or that, who turn out to be real human beings with stories that would make you weep. They struggle with the same things that you and I struggle with every day.

Whether you are seventeen or seventy, there is a child or adolescent in you who needs your love and your acceptance. At the same time, there’s an *adult* inside you who needs to understand which attitudes and behaviors are working and which ones are sabotaging your dreams.

In the end, the real mission of this book—my objective, my *obsession*—is to help you become the world’s greatest expert on one subject: yourself.



*Greg Harden*

TOM BRADY

FOREWORD

Seven-time Super Bowl Champion • Five-time Super Bowl MVP • Three-time league MVP • Fourteen-time Pro-Bowler • Sixth-round pick in the 2000 NFL draft • 199th selection overall (behind six other quarterbacks)

**“What I learned from Greg is still a part of who I am today.”**

Some people think that going away to college makes you an adult. But when I came to the University of Michigan in 1995, I was still a sheltered kid from San Mateo, California, the youngest in a family of four children, and the only boy. It was my first time in the Midwest. I had very little life experience and not much perspective. I needed to grow up fast, but I didn't know how.

I arrived on campus wanting to play football. But things didn't go according to my plan. There were six guys ahead of me on the depth chart. I believed I wasn't being given the same opportunities to succeed as some other players were. I thought I'd never get to play football here. In my mind, it was very possible I'd chosen the wrong school. I was frustrated and disheartened. But as the saying goes, when the student is ready, the teacher appears.

Greg Harden had been at the University of Michigan since 1986, working mostly with the football and basketball teams. His job title was Director of Athletic Counseling, but you would never have known it. He was just another guy on the sidelines during practices, and in meal rooms and on team road trips. At one point during the season, Greg told me he'd been watching me. Maybe the two of us could find some time to spend together? Hey, what about 8:00 a.m. next Tuesday? I didn't know I'd just met a great, lifelong mentor, and one of the greatest treasures and resources for student athletes that the University of Michigan will ever know.

Whenever I think of Greg, I picture his infectious smile, his charisma, his wisdom, his off-the-charts IQ and EQ, the natural ability he has to connect with a huge variety of people. Greg was—and is—a progressive thinker. He's always been ahead of his time. He took in the whole picture, meaning that along with the physical and mental parts of being a student athlete, Greg also saw me as an emotional being. What I *really* needed to do was to direct my emotions to the right place.

Greg was extremely caring, but he wasn't a coddler. Over the next few months and years, he pushed me to wake up and grow up. With Greg's help, I transformed from a player who

always believed that circumstances were stacked against him, into one who competed with energy, enthusiasm, a positive outlook, and an unshakable belief in himself. Greg never allowed me (or anybody) to play the victim. *If it was to be, it was up to me.* By giving me the tools I needed to succeed on my own terms, so I could become the best player and person I could be, he rewired my outlook and maybe even my psyche.

More than twenty years later, I still think back on Greg's teachings. *Quit focusing on all the things you can't control. Focus on being the best version of yourself. Work as hard as you can. If you're only going to get one rep, do it perfectly. I don't give a shit about what's "fair!" Go out there, embrace your teammates, be a leader, and do the best you can!*

As time went on, I started looking at football through a new lens. *If it was to be, it was up to me.* Greg reminded me it's not supposed to be easy. The obstacle in your path isn't there to create frustration or make you doubt yourself, or storm off, or quit. The obstacle is the way. Difficulty is an *advantage*. The more obstacles in your path, the higher the odds you'll succeed. Why? Because in the face of those obstacles, a lot of other guys will just back down. That mindset is a big reason why, early in my football career when I was drafted by the New England Patriots, rather than tell myself I'd never get the opportunity to play, I thought, *Okay, let's go, it's time to see what I'm really made of. If I'm going to be the best, I have to beat the best.*

What I learned from Greg is still a part of who I am today. If my team is down 10 points with a minute and a half left to play, that's an opportunity. There's nothing wrong with losing late in a game. What's there to worry about? There's nothing to lose—*so why not just go for it?* Is there a better opportunity for your team to come back and win the game? A better moment to dig deep, focus, and show your mental toughness? A better opportunity for you to learn about who you really are? *That's where greatness lies. That's the glory of sport. That's how Greg sees life.*

It goes beyond the field, too. If you're in a place in life you don't want to be, it's up to you to make it better. To reframe it by focusing on the positive, and approaching it with enthusiasm. In the end, your positivity and enthusiasm will contribute to creating the outcome you're after. Once you apply this mindset to all aspects of your life, you corner fear. Fear basically has nowhere to go.

For his whole career, Greg has practiced what he's preached. He's kept growing, learning, getting better, getting things done, putting in the work and living up to his own high standards. If NFL and college teams embraced Greg's wisdom, a lot of lives would be positively impacted and transformed. The world needs more Greg Hardens. Meanwhile, I'm one of the many hundreds of student athletes who were lucky enough to work alongside the original.

*Tom Brady*

## CHAPTER 1

### DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

If you read the outside of this book, you know that I've been counseling athletes at the University of Michigan for over thirty years. Along the way, I've had the privilege of helping a few special athletes you've heard of—think Tom Brady, Michael Phelps, Desmond Howard—and a lot more athletes who have done things just as great or greater, though with maybe a little less widespread public fanfare.

To put myself in this position helping student athletes, coaches, counselors, entrepreneurs, Fortune 100 companies—as well as addicts and criminals—to become the world's greatest experts on themselves so that they could become the best versions of themselves, I had to start by doing this for myself.

When I was a very young man of fourteen years, I had this uncle who would come by the house just to harass me. When I was eight, I thought he was amusing and delightful. By fourteen, I couldn't stand him.

He came by one day, and he was picking on me, as usual, poking and prodding and doing everything he could to get on my last nerve. And it was working. Then he finally said to me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I thought about it for a few seconds, and then I answered: "I want to be different."

"No, seriously, boy," he said. "What are you gonna do when you're an adult?"

"Seriously," I said. "I want to be *different*."

Which was my indirect, almost polite way of saying, "I don't want to be like you."

Think back to when you were fourteen. Looking back on all the adults who were in your life then, did you really want to grow up to be just like them? From my own fourteen-year-old vantage point, so many of the adults I had seen were constantly complaining and whining and moaning and groaning. Why would I want to sign up for that?

They were too often *miserable*, *negative*, and *depressed*, and not only that, they were recruiting me to be exactly the same way. "This is the way the world works, kid. You gotta pick a side. Pick a color, pick a religion, pick a political party. You gotta figure out how to make money and consume everything, and most importantly, you gotta remember to always think only about yourself."

At fourteen years old, I *knew* I wanted something different. If only I'd been smart enough to hold on to that simple idea . . .

But instead of having the strength and wisdom to become my own best version of myself, I let the times I was living in mold my character. It was a tumultuous time in this country, and

“the hate that hate made” tried to consume me every day. I wasn’t just negative, miserable, and depressed. I was angry at the whole world. I was truly and profoundly my own worst enemy, and the only thing that exceeded my ignorance was my arrogance.

I was programmed—and socialized—to be prejudiced, to be sexist, to be a homophobe and a xenophobe, to hate entire *groups* of people. I was recruited out of my high school in Detroit to run track at the University of Michigan, and I arrived on campus *committed* to being angry, *committed* to being filled with hate. What I wasn’t committed to was running track or making smart choices in my life. Two years later, I was out of school, with a child on the way, working at a steel mill—cleaning out the coils underneath a furnace, wearing a rubber suit in 105 degrees.

I had to take a hard look at my life then. Ask myself if I was really doing what I wanted to do with my time here on earth. It was a long, long journey to finally get back to that mindset I had at fourteen. To this dream I had of being *different*.

I decided to give school another try. I was twenty-eight, older than most of my peers, when I finally graduated with a master’s degree in social work. I started to build a career by counseling people who were struggling with addiction to alcohol and drugs. I never dreamed I’d ever be a part of the world of athletics again—until the day I told Bo Schembechler I didn’t want to talk to his football players. Instead of dismissing me as a fool, he asked to *meet* me! (See “Chapter 15: A Matter of Trust.”)

In the three decades since, I’ve had the privilege of working with thousands of individuals who allowed me to dare them to believe in themselves. And no matter who they were or where they came from, I told them all the same thing I told Tom Brady the first time he sat in my office: *If you don’t believe in yourself, why should I believe in you?*

You’ll hear me use that phrase a few more times throughout this book. You’ll also hear me ask you to *Practice, Train, and Rehearse*. Because if you practice, train, and rehearse believing in yourself, it will become second nature. If you practice, train, and rehearse giving 100 percent, 100 percent of the time, that will become second nature, too.

But if you practice, train, and rehearse being negative, miserable, and depressed, well, that’s what you’ll be good at.

You’ll also hear me talk about how important it is for you to learn to *control the controllables*. Because there are so many things in life you can’t control—things that other people do, or ways that they try to make you feel—and just a few important things that you *can* control, most importantly your own actions, reactions, and feelings.

**This message is more important today than ever as we watch this country, and the entire world, struggle with not one but two historic crises at the same time.**

Our ability to keep functioning, both together and as individuals, as *everything* gets turned upside down all around us—to focus on those things that we *can* control when everything else seems to be spinning completely out of control—is more valuable right now than it has ever been. I’ll have a lot more to say about this in “Chapter 3: Control the Controllables!”

In the end, all I’m trying to do is build you up, encourage you to stay positive in a

negative world, and help you *stay sane in an insane world*.

I want you to become the best friend you ever had in your life, because your very best friend *has* to be you.

I want you to become the world's greatest expert on yourself, so you'll have the knowledge and the power to become the very best *version* of yourself.

Or as my amazing wife, Shelia Harden, likes to say, "I want you to live your best life *now*."

And when you're done with this book, I've got something very important to ask you in the very last chapter.

So let's get started.

**I can't teach** Tom Brady  
**how to** throw the ball.  
**I can't teach** Desmond Howard  
**how to** catch the ball.  
**I can't teach** Michael Phelps  
**how to do** a perfect flip turn.  
**All I can do** is teach you  
**how to become**  
the world's greatest  
expert on one subject:  
**Yourself.**

— GREG HARDEN

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT MAKES THEM DIFFERENT?

It was December 1999. The annual “Michigan Football Bust,” where the past season is reviewed and the seniors are recognized and given their M rings. It’s a big event, with all the players’ families, the coaches, and many of the team’s fans.

When the event was over, two parents approached me: Tom Brady, Sr. and his wife, Galynn. Mr. Brady shook my hand and said, “We just wanted to say thank you so much for what you did for our son. You really helped change his life, and we are eternally grateful.”

“Look, let me tell you something,” I said to them. “I appreciate everything you’re saying, but I only did for your son what he *allowed* me to do. Because of how you raised him, he was open to growing mentally, physically, and spiritually. To being guided. His respect for authority, his understanding of how to listen and take direction—that all comes from you. So I want to thank *you* for what you did to prepare him to be one of the most coachable kids I’ve ever had at Michigan.”

I wasn’t just saying it to be nice. I meant every word. I’ll talk more about Tom Brady in “Chapter 4: Who Will Answer?” and about how I challenged him to tell me how he expected coaches to believe in him if he didn’t believe in himself. At that banquet, the regular season was over, but Brady was still preparing to lead the team into the Orange Bowl, where he would overcome three 14-point deficits to beat Alabama 35-34 in overtime—still one of the best performances I’ve ever seen by a college quarterback.

If Tom Brady was one of the most coachable kids I had ever met, it was Desmond Howard who set the standard. I talk about him in “Chapter 5: Dream Big, Believe Big, Become Big.” He was a few years before Brady, and at the time I had never met anyone quite like him. Of all the athletes I have worked with, in all the sports at Michigan, Desmond Howard was the one kid who would look me right in the eye and say, “Tell me what to do. Tell me every mistake you’ve ever made, so I can avoid them.”

“I’m not like the other guys on the team,” he told me on another occasion. “If you tell me, ‘Don’t touch that because it will burn you,’ I guarantee you I won’t touch that thing! Unlike a lot of my friends, my teammates, if you tell me something won’t work, I’ll believe you. *Just tell me what works.*”

This all came after we got him through a tough period in his life, when he was a sophomore, playing a new position, and actually wondering if he should transfer to another school. When I told him that this “geographical cure” was just a fantasy and that he needed to stay at Michigan and work on becoming the best athlete on the team, he *listened* to me. And



he stayed.

And he went on to become the first Heisman Trophy winner at Michigan in fifty-one years.

What I didn't know when I first met Desmond was that he had been studying me ever since I first talked to the football team when he was a freshman. A year and a half later, he finally came to talk to me, and I've been talking to him ever since, through eleven years as a professional football player—and the only special-teams player ever to be named Super Bowl MVP—and even now as a fixture on ESPN's *College GameDay*.

The first thing that Tom Brady and Desmond Howard had in common—the one thing shared by some of the biggest stars and highest-level performers I've worked with over the years—is that they were *hungry* for input, *hungry* for information, *hungry* to learn.

They were *coachable* in every sense of the word.

Now, when we get to Michael Phelps in “Chapter 6: What Does Success Look Like?,” I'll be talking about a unique time in the young man's life, when he had already become an Olympic medalist after giving up his whole life to the sport of swimming. He may have been rebelling at age nineteen, having never had a real childhood, but from age four to eighteen, he was coachable as hell. Just ask the US swim coach, Bob Bowman. Even though God gifted him with the perfect swimmer's body, Michael Phelps would never have become the most decorated Olympian in history if he weren't an absolute *sponge* (water, swimming, sponge—sorry) for every tiny detail on how to maximize his talent in the water.

So beyond *coachability*, the second thing these high performers have in common is what I'm going to call *a belief in the process of self-improvement*. I talk more about this topic in “Chapter 19: Commit, Improve, Maintain.” It's a three-step process in which you *commit* to doing what it takes to make yourself better, then you do the hard work to *improve* your performance in EVERYTHING you do, and then you *maintain* that performance over time.

A simple idea, right? But how many people really do this?

I mean, *really* do this?

In Tom Brady's 2017 book, *The TB12 Method: How to Achieve a Lifetime of Sustained Peak Performance*, he shares the story of his “secret” Friday-morning workout, when he'd carve out some personal one-on-one time with the Patriots' strength-and-conditioning coach:

With every level you reach, everyone gets faster, stronger, and better, and I had to work really hard just to be competitive. That's why every Friday at 6:00 a.m., when no one else was around, I worked with [him] doing speed and footwork drills, trying to close the gap between me and my teammates.

Now, getting up early on one Friday morning didn't suddenly allow Tom Brady to “close the gap.” But if you do something today that improves your performance by one-tenth of 1 percent . . .

And then you do it again tomorrow.

And then again the next day.

We're talking compound interest—just think where you'll be a year from now!

So: coachability, a desire to learn. Believing in, and committing yourself to, the process of self-improvement. That's two things. Here's the third, and maybe the most important of all. And yet, maybe the hardest thing to define . . .

Sometimes I call it an *edge*. Sometimes I call it an *extra gear*. Maybe you have your own word for it, but I think you know what I'm talking about here.

On football Saturdays, I usually sit down close to the field, right behind the Michigan bench. I interact with some of the players during the game, doing everything I can to give encouragement. But sometimes, a special player will come along who turns everything around and gives *me* the encouragement.

Such a player was Charles Woodson, another Heisman Trophy winner who would go on to become arguably the best defensive back in the history of the game, at both the college *and* professional level. (In fact, he was just inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame on the first ballot as I was finishing this book!)

We were home against Iowa, the sixth game of the season after starting the season 5-0, including big wins over Colorado and Notre Dame. But this game was not going our way, and Iowa was ahead 21-7 at halftime. As the players came out to start the second half, Charles Woodson caught my eye, walked over closer to me, and said, "Don't worry, G, we got this."

Now, understand, this wasn't a basketball game. It wasn't as if Woodson could put the whole team on his back, go out, and score 40 points in the second half. In fact, he wasn't even an offensive player! He played defense! How does a defensive player say, "We got this," when his team is 14 points down?

He hit a switch in his mind and his body to elevate his performance to another level. And just as importantly, he directly inspired his teammates to do the same.

Final score: Michigan 28, Iowa 24.

The team would finish that season undefeated, with Woodson returning a punt for a touchdown in the Ohio State game. When they went on to beat Washington State in the Rose Bowl, it was Michigan's first national football championship since 1948.

What I'm trying to tell you here is that sometimes you see somebody performing at the highest level you can imagine. *And then they kick it up into another gear.*

Because they *have to*.

Because the circumstances require it.

Because it's the only way they're going to win.

It happens, not within the context of only one game, but over an entire *season*, over an entire *career*. When Tom Brady had to share his starting job at Michigan in his senior year . . .

It made him better.

When he fell to the sixth round of the NFL draft, finally being picked number 199 . . .

It made him better.

Even now, at forty-three years old, a seven-time Super Bowl champion, he still plays like

he's trying to prove something. (This was another story that was changing even as I was finishing this book. Tom was preparing to appear in his tenth Super Bowl, the first with his new team . . . And you know how that turned out.) He's still giving 100 percent, 100 percent of the time. ("Chapter 11: The 100 Percent Challenge.")

That's the edge, the extra gear I'm talking about. The ability to turn it up when you need to, even when it feels as if you were *already* giving 100 percent. To *decide* that you're going to win. To *decide* that you're going to find a way to push yourself, and everyone else around you, to another level.

To *decide* that you're going to take all the failures and setbacks in your life and turn them into *fuel*.

Like Michael Jordan, coming back to the NBA after the murder of his father and after struggling to become a pro baseball player, and leading the Bulls to three more consecutive championships.

Or Tiger Woods, convalescing from his *fourth* back surgery and wondering if he would ever be able to swing a club again or even walk right, working his way back to the top of the game and winning the Masters at age forty-three.

Or Mario Lemieux, missing two months of the NHL season with Hodgkin's lymphoma, nearly dying from it, then coming back to win the scoring title.

And let's be clear, it's not just men who own these stories:

Figure skater Nancy Kerrigan, attacked by a man with a club, coming back to medal in the 1994 Winter Olympics.

Gymnast Kerri Strug, vaulting on a severely injured ankle to help the United States secure the team gold medal at the 1996 Olympics.

Tennis player Monica Seles, stabbed on the court by a deranged fan of her rival, then coming back to medal in the 2000 Olympics.

We love these comeback stories. They *inspire* us. But I want you to be more than inspired. I want you to realize that this ability to dig down and find that extra gear when you really need it is something that *you already have inside yourself*.

I know it. You know it. Take a moment right now. Think back on such a moment in your life, when you had to *decide* not to quit. When you had to *decide* to give even more than what you thought was your best.

Now imagine making that determination, that *extra gear*, a permanent part of you. Something you can call upon whenever you need it. Something that will propel you to victory—or, at the very least, force your opponent to find his or her extra gear just to have a chance at beating you.

That's what makes a champion.

I've tried to cover three important topics here, but please also remember what I *didn't* say. In this whole discussion of "What makes them different?" did I ever mention anything about 2 percent body fat, or a forty-inch vertical leap, or a 4.3-second forty-yard dash? I did not, and

in fact, I can point out plenty of people who are blessed with such physical gifts who never become great at athletics or, sadly, at anything else in life.

Taken more broadly, I could just as easily talk about having an IQ of 200, or any other superhuman ability that only a few people are ever born with. It's not about what God gave you—not even if you happen to have been born half-dolphin like Michael Phelps, or with the mental horsepower of a savant. It's about how you choose to live your life every day:

- being coachable and hungry to learn;
- being committed to the process of continuous self-improvement;
- believing that you have that special “extra gear” to call on when you really need it, and that win, lose, or draw, you'll rise above fear and self-doubt (your greatest enemies) and give everything you've got, no matter the outcome.

These are the three things you need to be the absolute best, *to be a meaningful force in the universe*—not just in athletics but also in your career, in your relationships, in every single thing you do.

Throughout the rest of this book, I'm going to talk some more about the amazing athletes I've worked with, but remember this: Every quality I describe, every edge that these athletes have—you have them, too.

They are inside you right now. You *know* they are.

So let's find a way to make all those qualities the driving forces in your life.

And you will be closer to unstoppable.