

# MASTERING YOUR MIND TO BE MORE AND UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL

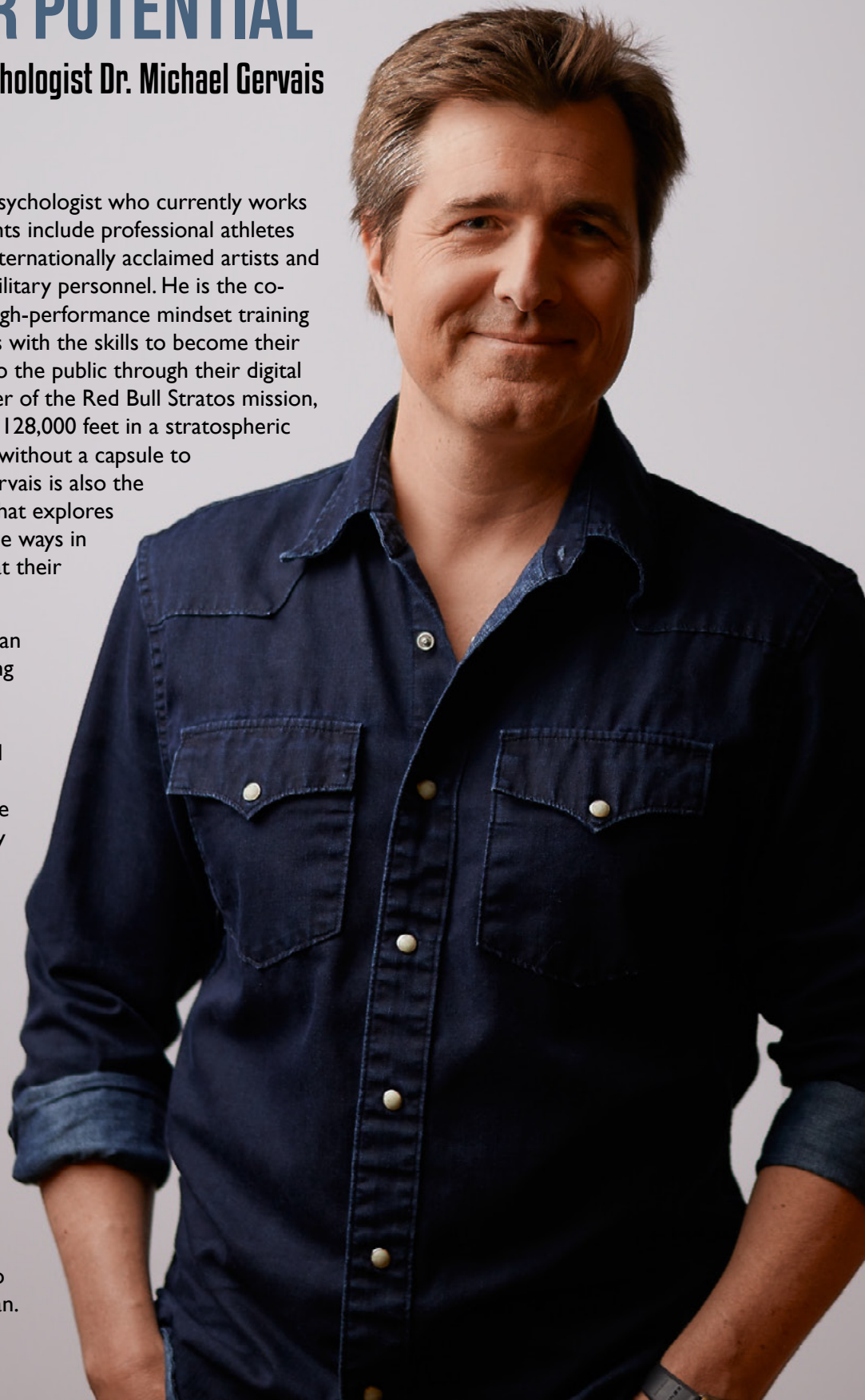
With High-Performance Psychologist Dr. Michael Gervais

## INTERVIEW BY JAWN ANGUS

Dr. Gervais is a high-performance psychologist who currently works with the Seattle Seahawks. His clients include professional athletes from all major sports, Olympians, internationally acclaimed artists and musicians, corporate leaders, and military personnel. He is the co-founder of Compete to Create, a high-performance mindset training platform that provides corporations with the skills to become their best, and it is now available online to the public through their digital platform. He was an integral member of the Red Bull Stratos mission, where Felix Baumgartner ascended 128,000 feet in a stratospheric balloon to become the first human without a capsule to travel at the speed of sound. Dr. Gervais is also the host of Finding Mastery, a podcast that explores the paths of high-performers and the ways in which they train their minds to be at their very best.

Dr. Gervais believes that every human should have their own unique guiding philosophy. This philosophy should be in alignment with their thoughts, words, and actions. Once a personal philosophy is identified and one is very clear about the vision they have for their future—including how they want to experience it—then, at this point, the beginning framework of becoming one's best self has been achieved. I took Dr. Gervais and Coach Carroll's "Finding Your Best" high-performance mindset class earlier this year.

We sat down and discussed the value that psychology has in the world today, the ways in which we can live with purpose through awareness and being present, the ways in which professional athletes prepare for big moments, and what it was that drove him to paddle solo over thirty miles in the Pacific Ocean.





**Jawn Angus: How has the perception of psychology changed from decades ago to the way society views it today?**

**Dr. Michael Gervais:** The history and tradition of psychology was born out of the medical model and what medicine does is it understands what's broken, what's not working, and it identifies the dysfunctional parts of the human body. Psychology was born from that, and so the natural examination is to study what isn't working in terms of the mind. The beginnings of psychology were the study and understanding of how the mind, emotions, and behavior work, and to see if we could enhance those and/or predict the outcomes of behavior, emotions, and thoughts.

In terms of prediction, it's about what the outcomes are with particular

clusters of behaviors and thinking patterns in emotional regulations. It was initially a clustering of symptoms that really was at the core of the early days of psychology and the science of psychology. Now that's changed, and one of the ways we've seen it change is its ability to eloquently map with the tradition of sport.

Sixty years ago, coaches did everything. They were the chefs, the technical coach, and even the parents in some respects. They were also the psychologists, the strength coach; they did it all. Then, some of the avant-garde coaches said, "You know what? There's this new thing called strength and conditioning. What if we could get our athletes bigger, faster, stronger, and they could last longer?" So, they brought in strength coaches

and they offloaded the expertise of strength and conditioning so that they could think more about other aspects of their job. That started working so well that athletes started to unfortunately break down. They were bigger, faster, and stronger, but not properly recovering.

The next wave came in about twenty years later in the form of athletic training and physical therapy, focusing on the recovery modules to help athletes recover from deep strains. Then came nutrition, and now the last of the training sciences is about psychology. Psychology in sport first mapped towards traditional psychology in the sense that psychologists were recruited to help with challenging athletes. That's not how it works anymore. Right now, we're in a very exciting time wherein





psychology is well-recognized and it's understood that there are only three things that we can train as humans. We can train our craft—the technical skills of our job—we can train our body to be more dynamic, stronger, and more flexible, and we can train our mind. It's not about repairing the damaged, the broken, or the dysfunctional; at this point, it really is about, “How do we frontload and get ahead of the way that our mind might naturally respond to high-stress or high-consequence environments?”

Frontloading is analogous to training, and so we can train our mind to be able to respond more gracefully, more eloquently, and more sturdily in moments of stress and pressure. What's happening right now across world-class organizations in sport and otherwise, is that psychology is not just reserved for those that are struggling. It is something that is celebrated in the DNA of organizations because

they understand that the human experience is complicated, it's nuanced, it's textured, and we should provide all the resources we possibly can from good science to help people flourish in life. It's about celebrating the practices we have to be able to strengthen and condition one's mind to further pursue potential.

**JA: With those three things that we can train as humans (our mind, body, and craft), are there different techniques used to train in these areas? Is it different for a professional athlete versus a corporate manager?**

**MG:** Same approach. The mental skills for humans are the same and that's what's wonderful about psychology. Wherever you go, you take your mind with you. The principles are universal to industry, race, gender, and culture. There are some sensitivities to values that are culturally unique, but the principles

tend to be the same. Ultimately, all the principles are really designed to help humans live in the present moment more often.

Whether it's mindfulness, confidence training, mental imagery, or arousal regulation, all are designed to help a human live in the present moment more often. The principles and practices are the same. If they're evidence-based, there's some variation and there's also the innovation that takes place inside unique and varied cultures. Let's call that syntax, or vibe—it's a unique way that these principles are explained to a particular performer or athlete.

**JA: Regarding living in the present moment, I've heard you say, “Don't make any moment bigger than any other moment.” How does an Olympic athlete treat his or her training the same as an Olympic performance?**

**MG:** That's a great question. It requires training. There are two basic approaches to go into large games, whether it's world championships, the Superbowl, the Olympics, a pitch meeting in business, or an artistic onstage performance. There are two basic ways to think about it, so let's just stay with the Olympic theme. One is that it's the most heavy, stressful environment that you're going to be in in your professional setting. In that thinking, honor it in training for the incredible stress and pressure that it will be.

The other strategy is to think about it in the sense that the rules are the same—there are no extra consequences if you don't make it or you fail and make a mistake. There's no sniper in the seventh row if you drop a ball or trip out at the starting gates. Because of that, it really is just like every other race. (The only difference is that more people are watching.)

Framing it that way begs the question, "Am I going to change my entire psychology because there are more people watching? Am I going to change everything in the way I think about how I am at my best because other people are watching?" If that's the case, you have to switch over to the first model. But if you make the decision that you know how to find your best regardless of the audience (i.e. my best happens when I am A, B, C and D), then you know you'll be calm, focused, present, and able to have a high level of trust that you'll be able to figure it out as you go. You know how to speak to yourself. You know how to prepare the week before, the night before, and the morning of, and you're going to trust your systems. If other people are watching, that's great, but you can't control how many are people watching. What you *can* control is yourself and that's what you're going to do.

It's about picking one approach or the other, and there's not a right and wrong. I'm much more a fan of the latter because I get to practice all the time, every moment, every day of my life, how best to be present and how to be my very best in this moment. If that is my practice, then when the Olympics are here, great—I've already practiced! But if I go to the first model, which is the Olympics are the biggest and most stressful event and so I should train as such, it gives me the opportunity to feel small and it doesn't give me the chance to practice in realistically similar environments because I have to seek out another big environment. For me, that's how I think about it. As a trained psychologist, my job is to not just impose my approach, but to understand what will be the best fit for the people I work with. If they like the first approach, that's great! I will share my point of view, but if they're strong on theirs, no worries. Success can happen both ways.

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It’s the story that you make about the Olympics that really dictates your experience in it, and if you go way upstream to this thought that, “There’s no such thing as a big moment; it’s just *this* moment and my job is to practice, train, and condition myself to be in this moment right here, right now,” then you are well-equipped to deal with moments when people are watching.

**JA: As the Performance Psychologist for the Seattle Seahawks, and Co-Founder of *Compete to Create* with Seahawks’ head coach Pete Carroll, how does your thinking differ from his theory that every practice is a championship practice, and every game is a championship game? Your model is to bring every moment down so that one moment isn’t superior to the next, whereas Coach Carroll’s theory is to elevate every single moment so**

**that every moment is huge. Is that fair to say?**

**MG:** Exactly right. He and I get to the exact same place, which is: this is the only moment so make it the most amazing you possibly can! I approach it as there’s no such thing as a big moment, there’s only *this* moment, and his approach is that every moment’s big so let’s be in it right now. We get to the same place. I love when he says this: “This is a championship game, this is a championship opportunity.” What he’s really talking about is it’s an opportunity to bring your very best today. Let’s practice that today and not wait for somebody else to tell us that it’s important. It’s important right now because if I were to take away this moment, what are the consequences? If we can’t live in this moment, it’s essentially like a physical death. That’s a really cool way to think about it.

**JA: What is your day-to-day**

**role with the Seahawks? How is psychology used in their organization?**

**MG:** For the Seattle Seahawks, psychology is one of the core pillars, and understanding and appreciating the value and condition of one’s mind is very important. The whole psychological culture begins with Coach Carroll; he is the cultural curator. The custodians of culture are everybody else in the organization. In essence, culture is the artifact of relationships—it’s the texture of the relationships we have, first with ourselves, then with others, and also with the challenges that lie ahead.

Psychology is infused in the DNA of the Seahawks’ organization because that’s how Coach Carroll has created his culture. It’s not a psychologist sitting in a dark room with a comfortable couch, cross-legged, trying to understand and examine the dysfunctions of another human. It’s nothing close to that. It’s something





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that is talked about every day through many hallway conversations and sideline chats. There are more intense conversations that do happen in a more private setting, but it is not what, at first pass, you might imagine. Coach Carroll has done an extraordinary job of amplifying the importance of psychology while also being very clear about ways that we can train it together.

I was the first support psychologist on the field or on the sidelines in the NFL, and that was because of Coach Carroll's vision. As of two months ago, there were nine teams with psychologists and as of two weeks ago, thirty-two teams have a licensed psychologist on staff. It's awesome.

**JA: You have also worked with the U.S. women's volleyball team in past Olympics. What are some of the differences and/or similarities between working with explosive, alpha males who play an aggressive contact**

**sport, versus a team of female volleyball players?**

**MG:** Independent of gender or sport, the similarities are that the best in the world are more like each other than not. For these athletes, there is a relentless approach to organize their lives to get to the truth of their skills and the ways in which they match up against other highly skilled people. There's a deep drive to get to that truth when you're talking about the best of the best. The best value the truth and there are lots of ways to get at it.

There is always a clarity of the principles that drive thinking patterns, emotional responses, and movement patterns. In both athletic scenarios, there is also a natural genetic ability and a relentless work ethic. It would be a mistake for us to just herald the performance of strong men and women that got them to the podium, but it would serve us better to

understand how they organize their lives to flourish and pursue mastery.

One thing that is common amongst those that are at the tip of the arrow is that they organize their inner life to match the mission in their life. There's great clarity of their mission, the guiding principles that support that mission, and a relentless day-in-and-day-out approach to refine and build the mental, psychological, and emotional skills that allow them to adjust to the great challenges that they need to face in order to understand their potential. If we can collectively do it, therein lies the opportunity to have this incredible experience. Nobody can do it alone. Nobody can do anything extraordinary alone, even individual athletes or contributors in business. We need each other, and it's those relationships with ourselves and others that pay dividends.

**JA: You say that you believe**

**greatness is available to everybody. What do you mean by that and what is holding people back?**

**MG:** We were all born with this unique genetic predisposition; a genetic coding. Greatness is not like being the best at your skill, but rather it's the animation of your genetic coding—the animation of an expression of the potential of your mind—in your body and your craft, that's available to everybody. The easier, lazy way to think about greatness is that someone was the best of all time at a given sport/instrument etc. While there is something special in that, what I am suggesting is that what is great about the human experience is pushing to the edges of your capacity to really see your capabilities, and that includes love, talent, relationships, and being a custodian of the planet—that requires a rare effort. It requires a

rare commitment and when people do that, it's incredible. They have the capability to change their family structure, their neighborhood, an industry, or potentially the planet.

**JA: You coined the term, “FOPO” (fear of people’s opinions). What exactly does this mean?**

**MG:** Fear of people's opinions is one of the great constrictors of expression; it's one of the great chokeholds on human potential. The brain is this amazing inner-networked chemical and neuro-exchange that is so complicated that we don't really understand how it works, but we do know that there's no redundancies in the brain. Long ago, our ancient brain figured out how to keep us alive and it's the fight-flight-freeze mechanisms that accomplish that. There's a network in the brain called the limbic system and at the moment a threat is experienced (real or perceived), that

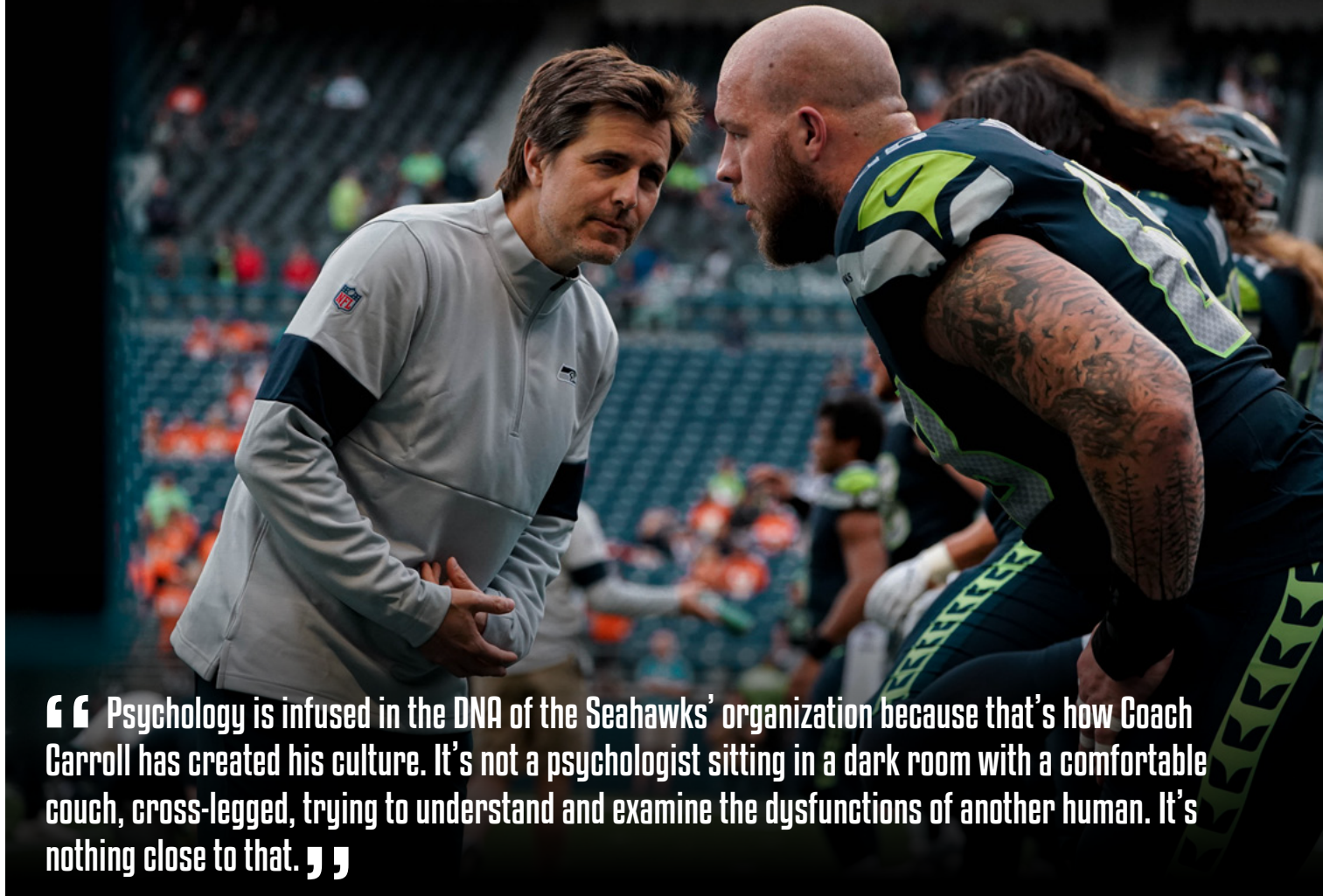
part of the brain lights up to prepare us for an appropriate response to the danger.

This response was first designed many millions of years ago. As we've become the species that we are now, there are no longer the same threats in our environment that we once had. The most modern threat we have is evidenced by what we experience most often—anxiety. It can come in the form of that clammed-up feeling we get in a social setting when we're not quite sure how to act or be. It can happen when we walk up three steps onto a small stage in a business platform to execute a keynote address or have a conversation in front of our peers. Perhaps it happens when we're in a boardroom and we raise our hand with all eyes turning to gaze upon us. We've all experienced the feeling of that response: your heart rate

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increases, breathing rate changes, and perspiration begins. Cotton-mouth is also a normal reaction and we can become so hyper-aware of our experience that our mind gets hijacked by the sensations of survival and we lose track of our thinking. These are all triggers that exist now in modern times because of what people think of us.

One of the most dangerous and threatening experiences that humans have today is not the tiger in the bush, but rather it’s the opinions of other people. There’s a physiological, psychological, and emotional experience that happens when people feel as though they’re being judged and critiqued. It is so internally hostile that we can often end up doing it to ourselves first. That’s one of the reasons we are so hyper-critical of ourselves—it’s to try to prepare ourselves to be “perfect” so that when we’re in front

of other people, we *can* be perfect. Unfortunately, life doesn’t work that way. When we self-critique and become judgmental of ourselves, we actually start chipping away at our core. We start chipping away at the stuff that is brilliant and wonderful about ourselves in the hopes that one day people will be able to appreciate us. It’s a really flawed model wherein we’re damaging ourselves so that somebody else can see the “perfect” remnants. FOPO is one of the great constrictors of human potential.

**JA: You stay so busy helping professionals reach their greatest potential, but you recently trained and completed quite the accomplishment of your own last summer. You paddled on a stand-up paddleboard from Catalina Island to Redondo Beach, California for charity, correct?**

**How long was that and what types of challenges did you face?**

**MG:** Yes! It was just under thirty-one miles. We raised money for The Ocean Cleanup project, a company that’s scraping the ocean for plastic. The project was designed to get us all reconnected with Mother Nature and to do some good for the planet. There have been just around twenty-five folks that have made that crossing via stand-up paddleboard. The main challenge is basically that you’re alone. (There’s a support boat that’s part of it.) You have to get through a shipping lane, a shark alley, and other natural conditions of the Pacific Ocean such as tide shift and waves. The essence of the project was to raise awareness and to deepen my understanding of what it’s like to really push the edges of my capacity. I’m not built for endurance. It was the first long-distance thing I’ve ever done.



**JA:** That's an ultra-event! How long did it take you?

**MG:** It was eight and a half hours, and somewhere between eighty-five and ninety-nine percent effort most of the time. At mile twenty-one, I got caught in a current that lasted forty-seven minutes. That felt like the ultimate joke. I was going at ninety-eight percent of my maximum exertion in full delirium.

**JA:** So you were just paddling away and not going anywhere?

**MG:** Yeah; mild hallucinations and not moving.

**JA:** At that point, with all the training that you've had and from all the work you've invested in helping other people, you probably had to make a decision to either keep going or to pack it in.

**MG:** Yeah, it was definitely one paddle at a time; one stroke at a time. One of the big insights and takeaways is that, when pain is bigger than purpose, pain wins. Flipped around, when purpose is bigger than pain, purpose wins. When something really matters to you, you'll do whatever it takes. If you think about parents

and the love that they have for their family and their children, they will literally step in front of a bus and do whatever it takes to do the right thing. It's all out of love, and that's purpose. Clarity of purpose matters. [Editor's note: Gervais raised more than \$13,000 through a GoFundMe page and the company he shares with Carroll, Compete to Create, matched the donation.]

***"When purpose is bigger than pain, purpose wins."***

**JA:** For young kids, is there an age you would say is too young for mindfulness training?

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**MG:** Good question. No. I'm not going to be able to point to any research on that, but the assumption is that we all have the capacity to train focus, and mindfulness is really focus training above all things. The gold dust is that you end up finding yourself being a little bit more relaxed if you're focusing on relaxing breaths, but it's concentration and focus training more than anything. I was practicing mindfulness with my son when he was three years old and it's as simple as putting a little stuffed animal on his belly; we would just count our breathing. Then I'd see if he could slow down his inhale and slow down his exhale, and we'd watch the stuffed animal go up and down, counting together. That was early training and then it turned into something that was more traditional. It became about our cadence of breathing and some autogenic relaxation techniques, and now he's doing some more advanced mindfulness training.

### **What's your vision for Compete to Create? Where do you want to take it?**

The mission of the company is to help every person on the planet train and condition their mind to live in the present moment more often. That's where everything is that's true and beautiful and good; that's where high performance is expressed and wisdom is revealed—in the present moment. That's not just reserved for the two of us; that's hopefully available to every person in every community in which we're included. We're making great efforts to distill those best practices from a science-informed way, as well as to innovate based on what we've learned in high-stress, high-pressure, rugged and even hostile environments. That's the essence of it.



more info:  
<https://findingmastery.net>  
<https://competetocreate.net>