



Alec Brewer <abrewer@ourobio.com>

Boring is Fun

1 message

The Inn <theinn@mail.beehiiv.com>

Reply-To: The Inn <sy8005939@gmail.com>

To: "abrewer@transfoamllc.com" <abrewer@transfoamllc.com>

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Master Boring Fundamentals 01: Boring is Fun

I'm that kid who got a B in high-school P.E.

I **hated** exercise. My parents used to force me to go for runs. I'd jog around the corner, just out of sight, and sit down on the curb. For 20 or 30 minutes I'd sit. I would poke at leaves on the ground and ramble under my breath about how dumb running was. When enough time had passed, I jogged back home, pretending to be out of breath.

I knew it was good for me. I knew I could lose some weight. I knew I could breathe easier. I knew I could have more energy. Did I exercise? Of course not.

We go to incredible lengths to avoid actions that we know are good for us.

For any endeavor, there are a set of basic skills needed to build a strong foundation. These are the boring fundamentals:

- Sleeping 8 hours a night, exercising consistently, eating your vegetables.
- Meditating, reading books, writing for yourself and for your peers.
- Domain specific fundamentals, like drilling guitar chords, or calculus.

Even when we know they are good for us, even when we know they will advance our goals, we avoid taking the steps needed.

We don't do the boring fundamentals because, well, they're boring. Repetitive actions done day after day are not a recipe for excitement. There's a disconnect between the future positive result and the present slog. Progress often plateaus, and only arrives in unpredictable bursts.

We gain the most useful skills in life only through consistency and practice. But the standard reasons for doing this work--“*it's good for you*”, “*you'll have more energy*”--aren't enough.

There is a better way to motivate ourselves. With the right mindset, with the right framing, we can learn to enjoy the boring fundamentals, and even find them fun.

This is the first of a series of posts on Mastering Boring Fundamentals. My aim with this series is not to yell until you eat your vegetables. You have your own set of goals. I want to help you achieve them in an efficient and fun way.

Bench Press and Curls

Flash forward to Lander Hall, the freshmen dorms at my university. I'm hunched over my laptop, crammed under a bunk with two roommates in a room meant for one. My neighbor Erik popped his head through the door. "Anyone wanna hit the gym?"

I didn't want to, of course, but there was something about his attitude. While he extended the invitation his hands were more animated than usual, his eyes a little wider. Underlying Erik's invitation was an excitement, an anticipation of something more. What did he know that I didn't?

I went with him that day. And a few days later. And at least 3 days a week for the rest of the semester.



I was probably lifting less weight than this guy

We did the most 'bro' workout imaginable: bench press and curls, every session. Each set I would lift the bar over and over until my arms turned into useless noodles. I was constantly embarrassed to be moving tiny weights next to dudes with biceps bigger than my thighs. Outside the gym I was sore all the time.

It sucked. So why did I keep going back? Because it was...fun. But it was a totally different type of fun than anything I'd ever experienced.

Types of fun

I used to think there was only one type of fun: pure hedonism. In my head everything else we do to survive--work, school, chores--was very clearly *not* fun. Ski enthusiast Tim Peck shows us that there are actually two types of fun:

- **Type 1 Fun:** Pure fun, untarnished by setbacks
- **Type 2 Fun:** Suffering now; fun after the fact, in retrospect
- **Not Fun:** Not fun now, not fun later, "I'm never doing that again"

We all know Type 1 fun. It's an effortless night out with friends, a lazy day on the beach, the lucky spin at the roulette table. Everything goes to plan and all is right with the world. Type 1 fun is what most people think about if you mention the word fun. It's great in the moment. Yet, too much Type 1 fun can lead to a sense of unease, of unfulfillment.

Type 2 fun is a sort of delayed fun. It's the tough hike up a mountain, the push through writer's block, the 20th mile of a marathon. It sucks in the moment.

After the fact, you'll remember the event fondly, no matter how painful it really was. Over time the memory of the grueling work disappears, and all that's left is the joy of finishing. You feel a sense of accomplishment that's deeply satisfying. You want to do it again.

Type 2 fun is why people pay money to dive through mud and jump over fire and climb ropes in the rain (see Tough Mudder obstacle races).



People pay 139 dollars to crawl through 8 miles of this.

Type 2 fun is the most satisfying type of fun, *because it was accompanied by a challenge*. There's something wholesome and addicting about this type of fun. If you want to get good at boring fundamentals, Type 2 fun is the one to chase.

Unfortunately, we often expect an activity to be Not Fun. Not Fun is why people avoid the boring fundamentals. Not Fun looks suspiciously like Type 2 fun, so we avoid anything that might possibly involve suffering.

Everyone who hates running thinks the experience will be Not Fun. Everyone who loves running knows that it's actually Type 2.

That's what bench presses and curls with Erik did for me. For the first time I realized that exercise didn't have to suck. For the first time I had experienced Type 2 fun.

Anticipation and Reframing Fun

Author and blogger [Tynan](#) is not someone I would call boring. He bought a private island, wears Rolexes, and travels most of the year--often on cruises. You'd think the man was addicted to adventure seeking and Type 1 fun. Nope. Tynan enjoys, of all things, washing the dishes:

“I could appreciate the warm water on my hands and the shine in the pot when it was clean...it was so enjoyable that I actually found myself looking forward to washing the dishes the next day.”

Tynan deliberately reframed his view of washing the dishes, to make it enjoyable.



We too can reframe what we imagine as Not Fun into Type 2 fun. We can train ourselves to love the pain of Type 2 fun. By attaching a boring action with the anticipation of positive feelings, we can turn the uncomfortable grind into fun.

Younger me anticipated the pain of running, and therefore running was painful. We anticipate suffering or boredom, and avoid doing the activity.

In Tiago Forte's summary of "How Emotions are Made", he demonstrates how our emotions are actually predictions:

“On your way to the airport to pick up a friend you haven't seen for years, your brain is busy predicting the feelings of joy and happiness you will soon be feeling. Which means you are **already feeling happy before the event has occurred**, and feel even happier when you actually see her.”

We don't feel happy because we picked up our friend, we feel happy because we anticipated picking up our friend. We don't feel annoyed because we're doing the dishes, we feel annoyed because we anticipated the worst parts of doing the dishes. Through repeated exposure our brains create predictive models:

“Your brain cannot help but constantly build predictive models of every experience you have, or any experience it thinks you might have.”

We can use these predictive models as a powerful tool, reshaping the boring into fun.

Instead of focusing on the viscous feeling of grease and the endless scrubbing of burnt edges, focus on the warm water and the shine of a clean pot. Instead of focusing on the pounding in your legs and the burning in your lungs, focus on the scenery whizzing by, the feeling of air rushing by your face.

When faced with the boring fundamentals, your brain's predictive models will start to predict fun, instead of boredom.

Boring is fun.

The Greatest High I Know



Designer Callum Flack has this to say about cardio:

“Running is the greatest high I know. No work ethic required.”

I went for a run yesterday, keeping Callum's remark in mind.

The run was exhilarating. Sure, I still cursed as I hobbled up that ****ing steep hill on the way home. But the whole experience was fun.

This is what I mean when I say I *love* boring fundamentals. I want you to experience this type of fun too.

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