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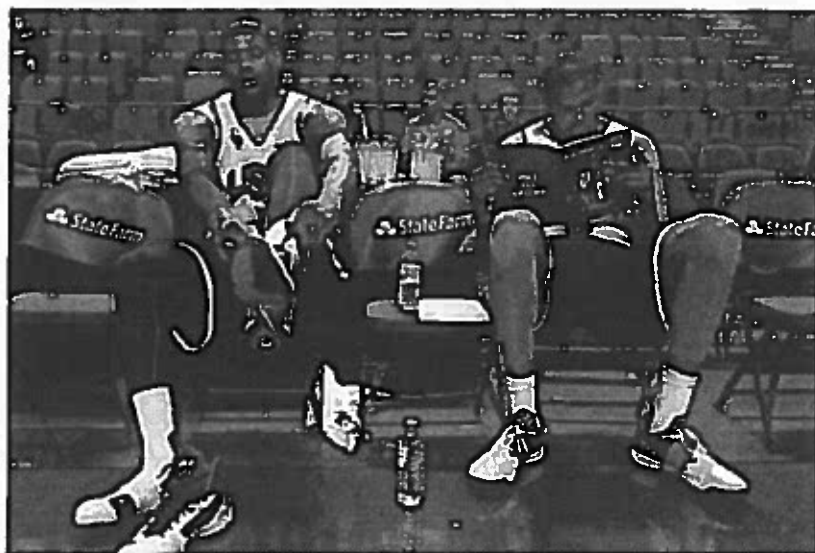
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## LeBron, Reading And How Books Can Benefit A Pro Athlete

By [Dan Grunfeld](#) @dangrunfeld on Sep 13 2012, 10:00a L



July 18, 2012, Manchester, UNITED KINGDOM; United States forward LeBron James (left) puts on his shoe as guard Kevin Durant (right) reads a game program during training for the 2012 London Olympic Games warm-up match against Great Britain at the Manchester Evening News Arena. Mandatory Credit: Joe Toth-US PRESSWIRE

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LeBron James made headlines for reading at his locker before dominating the 2012 NBA Playoffs. As a professional athlete who loves to read, Dan Grunfeld takes a firsthand look at how (and why) reading can improve an athlete's performance.

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It was one of the first days of summer in 2000. My sophomore year of high school had just ended, and in my 16-year-old head, the world was my oyster. Not only was I psyched that some decent colleges had started recruiting me to play basketball, but also, I had finally plunked my feet firmly in the realm of smooching chicks once in a while. On top of that, I was still riding high off surviving Y2K, so there were just a lot of positive developments in my young life at that point in time.

That is, until my afternoon dentist appointment, where I was bluntly informed that getting your braces off at 5'8 and then growing to 6'3 (and eventually beyond) isn't great for the alignment of the of choppers. The unexpected recommendation to fix the orthodontic issue I'd developed: braces. Again. For the rest of high school.

And ... buzzkill.

Rain clouds instantly rolled in on my summer sunshine, and it didn't help that my mom made my sister take me directly from the dentist to Borders to get my summer reading books. Now, I have genuinely loved to read since I was a little kid, but I had unwelcome braces on the brain and an important summer of AAU hoops ahead of me. Understandably, the last thing I wanted to do at that moment was to pick up those books. Momma gave me no choice, however, so all my sister heard on the ride over was that the books better not be too long, or else!

I needed a win in the form of some short reads, but then I located my first book -- *Undaunted Courage* by Stephen Ambrose -- and it had the thickness of an Encyclopedia Britannica. The cover displayed some colonial-looking-explorer-guys standing in the woods, and I'm pretty sure there were muskets involved. Discouraged, I picked up the book, and it felt like an appropriate weight to knock out some biccp curls with. I grew distressed, so I looked at my sister, flashed an imperfect, ironic smile, and told her that if she needed me, I'd be lying in traffic.

Thankfully, I got over these #highschoolproblems fairly quickly, and while I never ended up sporting those braces to match my varsity jacket and backwards Yankees hat (a.k.a. jeans and a T-shirt, always), something enduring did emerge from that day, aside from the funny memories: I read *Undaunted Courage* for a good chunk of the summer, and I loved it. I enjoyed the subject matter and the way it was written, but the interesting part was that I *especially* enjoyed reading it on my AAU basketball trips. It was relaxing -- a nice quiet way to unwind from all the games I was playing in front of so many college coaches -- and I happened to play well all summer. This easily could have been a coincidence, but looking back on that time now, as a dentally flawed 28-year-old in my seventh season playing professional basketball, I'm not so sure.

As I get older, I'm more and more convinced that being an avid reader can positively affect an athlete's performance and, in fact, their career. I only say this from personal experience, of course, because I'm an athlete who loves to read, and I know for sure that I've benefited athletically *because* I love to read. Usually, my reading is done for pleasure, independent of my life as a basketball player, but there is definitely overlap that I've become aware of over the years. And while I can only speak for myself on this matter, the recent past has shown that there is an emerging relationship between being a productive athlete and being an enthusiastic reader, particularly in my sport, basketball.

The most noted example of this came during last year's NBA Playoffs, when pictures circulated of **LeBron James** reading *The Hunger Games* trilogy in front of his locker before games (FYI, I'm Team Gale.) It wasn't just a one-time thing, either, because LeBron made reading a prominent part of his pre-game ritual during Miami's championship run. Though you can't unilaterally credit reading for LeBron's out-of-this-world domination throughout the playoffs, you can't completely discount its role, either.

LeBron, though, is not alone. His teammate **Chris Bosh** has also been known to grab a book in the locker room before a game, and the **Knicks'** Amar'e Stoudemire is so committed to literacy that he has the word "Read" tattooed on his forearm. (He also wrote a basketball novel for kids that was published this year.) While these are the most high-profile examples from the NBA, they are certainly not the only ones in sports today. A quick Google search reveals many athletes from many sports who are dedicated readers and keen literacy advocates, too.

So, the growing spotlight on reading in and around pro sports begs the question: in what ways can reading positively impact an athlete's performance? From my own experiences as well as from learning about the experiences of others, I've perceived a few ways in which picking up a book can, to some extent, equate to putting points on the scoreboard.

First and foremost, as LeBron showed, reading has the potential to serve as an effective game preparation technique. As someone who usually reads on game days (though not in the locker room), I can say firsthand that it's a nice way to settle into a calm, balanced state-of-mind in which many athletes perform well. The process of zoning out with a book for a few minutes before a high-powered moment of competition offers a sense of tranquility, and that feeling can translate into a state of relaxation and focus come game time. LeBron also acknowledged this, saying publicly that reading was an important outlet for him to quiet his mind and release some of the pressure of the 2012 playoffs. Even though he's the best player in the game, and he probably would have dominated anyway, it seems like reading played some part in helping him block out the noise so he could reach his most productive personal place, physically and mentally, where his immense talents could fully shine. That's the whole point of preparation, and while reading is far from the only way to get ready to play, it certainly can be a useful activity to mix into a pre-game routine.

In addition to game days, I also think that reading consistently throughout the entire course of a season can have some positive longer-term impact on performance. The reason I think this is because of the nature of sports, where seasons are long, practices are grueling, and games are intense. At every level -- but particularly at the professional level -- the work is hard, the ups and downs are drastic, and the scrutiny is sharp. Every athlete needs some form of distraction during this kind of season; a way to take your mind off your sport so it doesn't totally consume you. I know athletes who have written screenplays during a season, have become obsessed with politics, and have turned into hardcore gamers.

Personally, I've found reading to be the best in-season escape (with watching an amazing TV series like *Homeland* a close second), because for me, it's relaxing, it's enjoyable *and* it's mentally stimulating. Because your mind has to work while you read, there is little room for it to go anywhere else, so it's much easier to be completely present and to submerge yourself in an activity entirely unrelated to your season. When you get wrapped up in a great book, it's like you are living inside of it for a period of time, and it's often a welcomed break from the demands of being an athlete. For those of us who play sports for a living, staying mentally fresh is a huge part of having lasting success, so releasing pressure by getting lost in a story that is not your own can definitely contribute to a positive mental state which, in turn, can help foster peak performance over a season.

Yes, athletes can read to prepare before a game and to disconnect during a tough season, but reading can also teach us valuable lessons that both apply to our sports and help us grow in our sports. In my case, all of my favorite books have taught me something that I relate to my career as a basketball player. With my all-time favorite, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, it's the concept of revenge -- of how to deal with those who have wronged us -- a theme that I have encountered too much in the cut-throat world of competitive athletics. With another favorite, *The Alchemist*, it's listening to the universe and accepting the nature of what the world has in store for us, which is a useful message for when things don't go our way on the court, even when we think they should have. And with a non-fiction fave, *The Power of Now*, it's the practice of staying focused on the present moment and not wasting energy on things we have no control over, which is a mental approach that is expounded by many sports psychologists and performance experts alike.

These are just a few examples, but since reading is educational in nature, every book offers new and different learning opportunities. Some may apply directly to life as an athlete, others may not. No matter what, the lessons learned and the knowledge gained from being a reader are invaluable, because unlike athletics, reading lasts forever, so its benefits continue to serve in the game of life, the most important of them all, long after the ball stops bouncing.

Obviously, I'm an athlete who likes to read, and I genuinely believe that there is something symbiotic about these two parts of my life. Reading in some small way makes me a more productive athlete, and being a pro athlete makes me enjoy the serenity that reading provides just a little bit more. That's all great, but truthfully, I'll still love to read long after my days of playing ball are over. It's one of my most enjoyable personal hobbies, and maybe that's why it helps me as a ballplayer because I like doing it so much. Either way, it's not for everyone, and it's far from a secret weapon that guarantees sports success. But, if you're an athlete who enjoys it, like I do, it can help your performance in certain subtle ways. That's all we can ask for, and no matter what, if you nurture a love of reading, it will be with you forever. And that's a great gift, in and of itself.

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