

A portrait of Scott Hamilton, a bald man with blue eyes, smiling warmly. He is wearing a dark blue blazer over a blue collared shirt. His hands are clasped in front of him, and he is wearing a gold ring on his left hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

FINISH FIRST

WINNING CHANGES EVERYTHING

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SCOTT HAMILTON

FOREWORD BY DONALD MILLER

FINISH
FIRST

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WINNING CHANGES EVERYTHING

SCOTT HAMILTON
WITH ALLISON FALLON



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This book is dedicated to everyone who has suffered the pain of personal failure, desires success, and is looking for direction forward. I hope it gives you the strength to rise up and finish first.

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INTRODUCTION

Winning does change everything. “I know you know that, but how?” you might ask.

Consider the classic story of David and Goliath. We all know the story of how the little shepherd boy who, even though he was too young and too small, stood up to a giant. And, against all odds, defeated him.

Then came opportunity. The Philistine army had a giant, and they wanted to resolve the war with one battle. Goliath, the Philistine, against Israel’s best. Winner take all. Whoever lost would surrender and become slaves to the other. There wasn’t one soldier in Israel’s army who had the courage to stand up to this nine-and-a-half-foot giant. But then a small shepherd boy stood up and said that he would. He knew that the reward for winning this battle would change his life forever.

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Even though his brothers scoffed and belittled him. Even though King Saul reminded David he was small and too young. David knew this was his chance and was willing to risk it all for a chance at a better life.

There aren't many people on the planet who don't know that story. What we don't talk about is what happened next.

After that victory, David's life became a photo negative of what it was before. Before he stood up to Goliath, he had the lowly job of looking after a few sheep with no real expectation of anything else. Okay, so the prophet Samuel knew that he would someday be king. But no one else in his life ever thought anything of David or his future. He went on to become the greatest king ever known in his lifetime. And if you know Scripture, you know his life still has an impact today.

Could this be you?

Do you have the feeling that you have as many things going against you as David? That family, friends, and the people closest to you are always telling you why you can't do something? That your dreams are out of reach?

As children growing up, we have fantasies of winning the game. Or the award. Or the recognition that we know would make us feel good about ourselves.

As we grow up, we would all love to make straight A's on our report cards. We know that would make your parents proud. We would then earn a higher respect from our teachers. Those A's build trust that will make the next A much easier to achieve. Then the academic success in high school will make it easier to get into a better college. Getting into a

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better college means you will get a better job, and everything that comes with it. Better opportunities mean better financial security. With more financial security comes a better lifestyle and a much better quality of life. With personal success, our children have more opportunities. And so on.

Making the choice to finish first will change the trajectory and quality of your life.

And will change EVERYTHING!

Here's how . . .

CHAPTER 1

WHY YOU AREN'T A WINNER—YET

Winning is not a sometime thing, it is an all the time thing. You don't do things right once in a while . . . you do them right all the time.

—VINCE LOMBARDI¹

I have some bad news for you. You were not born a winner. You may have been told, somewhere along the way, that you were. Maybe it was your parents who said you were “number one” no matter what you did. Or maybe it was a high school coach who said all you needed to do to get the trophy was to show up in the uniform and play a few innings of the game. But those empty promises may have robbed you of your most victorious moments. They may have stolen the best you have to offer to yourself and to the world.

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I was not born a winner, and neither were you. That might seem like a harsh thing to say, but it is actually the kindest, most important gift I can give you. Winning is not about getting an award or a medal or making a certain amount of money. Winning is about accessing all of your innate human potential. You cannot be born a winner. But you can become one.

What a tragedy that so many of us don't.

There might be a part of you that resists this, that wants to fight to keep the "winning" status you feel you've earned but haven't worked to achieve. And then there is another part of you, I'm convinced, that is whispering to you right now that there is still so much untapped potential in you, more skill and tenacity and talent that the world has yet to see. What will it take for you to unlock the champion trapped inside of you?

What will it take for you to choose to finish first?

My Unimpressive Beginnings

I wish you could have seen me at the beginning of my figure skating career. If you had been there, watching like a fly on the wall, you wouldn't have seen the person I am today. You would have seen someone else entirely. You would have seen a version of me that was more familiar with losing than he was with winning, who was terrified to make the sacrifices he knew it would take to become a winner, and who wondered if any of the work

was even worth it. Winning has changed everything for me. It can change everything for you, too.

In the world of figure skating, I always tell people that if you're a woman and you win, you're really good. If you're a man and you don't medal, you should probably think about doing something else. Still, for some reason I kept skating even when I continually found myself in last place. That is a decision I will never fully understand, and yet I'm grateful I made it. Despite all the losing I had endured, I knew there was a champion inside me who had yet to be revealed.

My first year at the Novice level—the lowest level for men's competitive figure skating to qualify for the US National Championships—I didn't even make it to the National Championships, let alone win a medal. My parents were always supportive and made continual sacrifices to keep me skating, without any expectation for success. But I realized at one point that if I was ever going to find my way to the winner's circle, I would have to take a different approach.

When I was thirteen years old, my parents decided to move me to a new training facility as a last-ditch effort to see if something would “click” for me there.

The training facility was called Wagon Wheel and had a long track record of success. This facility wasn't cheap, and my parents weren't rich by any means. But they were relentlessly committed to helping me find my way in skating since they saw the health benefits it provided me in the midst of a world where the scales had been tipped against me.

I was an unwanted child, given up at birth by my biological

mother and adopted by my parents at six weeks of age. I like to say that I remember it like it was yesterday. On top of that, I battled a rare and undiagnosed childhood illness that started at the age of four and came with all kinds of unpleasant symptoms. The worst of the symptoms was stunted growth, which left me shorter and smaller than all of my classmates. I remember being teased and bullied.

If you feel like you came into this life so far behind the starting line that you shouldn't even consider winning, you are not alone. Most people feel like the obstacles and challenges in their way are too big. They may even feel like they have been set up to fail before trying. We tend to become focused on what everyone else has that we don't—money, status, size, athleticism, access, relationships, and so on—and forget that the list of qualities it takes to be a winner has far more to do with what is inside of us than what is outside of us.

Most of my young life was consumed with hospital visits and doctor's appointments, and after years, we still didn't have any answers. I can only imagine how frustrated and discouraged my parents must have been, wondering if their son was ever going to be healthy and happy like the other kids. By the time I was nine years old, my parents were physically and emotionally depleted. Then, at the advice of our family physician, who insisted they take a morning off each week, my parents sent me to Saturday morning "learn to skate" classes at the brand-new skating rink at Bowling Green State University.

Like most skaters, my first steps on the ice were tentative

and frightening. I spent most of that first morning holding on to the wall. I would find moments of bravery when I could let go for a brief time, but honestly, I held on more often than not. Then, over the next weeks, I was able to get all the way around the ice without touching the wall. Soon I was skating as well as the healthy kids. Soon after that, I was skating as well as the best athletes in my grade. Self-esteem is a powerful force—and now I had it for the very first time in my life.

I was small, my energy ran low, and I was struggling with the effects of my undiagnosed illness, but skating offered me exactly what I needed. The cool, moist air helped with my lung condition, and the constant movement helped with my ability to digest food properly. The more I focused on skating, the less my body seemed to be in direct opposition to me. I started practicing and getting better. I began competing some and improving. Still, for all those first years of skating, I was underachieving.

You might be wondering, *So what if you were underachieving? Why should that even matter? If skating was helping with your symptoms, if it was bringing you joy, why should it matter if you win a gold medal?* My answer to those questions is that if I had never found a way to finish first in skating and the rest of my life, none of the other amazing, miraculous things I've experienced would have happened. As Vince Lombardi once said, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

What It Means to Finish First

To me, winning is not about holding a gold medal, losing the twenty pounds, getting a promotion, or seeing my name on a plaque. In fact, I won a gold medal in 1984 and it lived in a brown paper bag in my underwear drawer for years. I resisted the natural urge to worship the idol of that success. What I found to be more interesting was what I was becoming in the process of achieving the unthinkable.

When I talk about finishing first, I'm not just talking about beating your competitors. To finish first is to understand what you have to offer the world and then to be the best you can be at offering exactly that. It means to understand your life purpose and to put your whole heart into being the best at what you do. It means to break through your perceived limitations, to overcome the barriers that stand in your way, and to make the biggest impact in the world that you are capable of making.

The general consensus of our culture seems to be that winning doesn't matter, that there's no point to trying hard because in the end, none of it matters. Instead of acknowledging who has won and who has lost, we hand out participation trophies and give everyone a ribbon before sending them home. Our fear of winning and losing has created an entire generation of entitled, apathetic, surefire losers. We haven't even stopped to consider the fact that losing might not hurt anyone. What if, by shielding people in this way, we're stealing

the transformational power of both winning and losing in their lives?

The irony is that if you believe nothing matters in life, you will live a life that doesn't matter.

We have never been more confused as a culture about winning and losing—what it really takes and why it matters. And yet I meet people every day who are hungry for more and desperate for something deeper, something better than the mediocre life they are living. The path to victory is precisely the thing that will open the door to the purpose they most crave.

Maybe to you it seems arrogant or selfish to think of yourself on a podium. You were trained to hold the door open for others, to be kind, thoughtful, sacrificial, and helpful. You were taught that the last would be first. Nothing is wrong with any of that. And as an Olympic athlete, I can say with confidence that the best way to help people—maybe even the only way to help anyone—is to start chipping away at the part of you that worries you don't have much to offer. Become someone who is worthy of winning, and you'll have a wider, greater impact than you ever dreamed possible.

In addition to this idea that winners are selfish and losers are the good guys, we also have the idea that winners and losers are preselected, and that doesn't feel fair to us. Yes, some of us are born with more resources than others, more access, more opportunities. But there is only one qualification that makes someone more likely to win: they choose to win.

The number-one predictor for whether you will be a

winner is if you decide to be one. It's a choice you and only you can make. And once you make it, nothing will be able to stop you.

The odds of me becoming an Olympic athlete were slim to none. Less than slim to none, actually. It was not even on my radar. It wasn't on my parents' radar, either. Yet my path to victory did something even more powerful than I could have predicted. Winning reshaped who I was as a person, helped to shape the world I live in, and even healed my physical body. Finishing first has opened doors for me to help others; it's given me a new lens through which to see my pain. It's helped me to face the challenges of life with integrity and perseverance.

What if winning could do the same for you?

Are You Done Being a Loser?

When I moved to Wagon Wheel in 1972, my skating immediately began to improve. I was surrounded by people who were better skaters than I was and had access to more experienced coaches. Everything and everyone began calling me to a higher standard. My work ethic improved, and I started to see myself as being able to hold my own with my competition. I even made it to the National Championships that year.

The problem was, at Nationals, I fell five times and came in dead last. Dead. Last. Talk about losing. At least when I lose, I go all the way. Of all the losers, I proved to be the best.

Looking back, I can't help but think about how important

all of this losing was in terms of preparing me for my future success. This is something few people talk about—how much losing really goes into winning. If there were a recipe for winning, losing would be a main ingredient. Just when you think you've added too much, add some more.

You'll be hard pressed to find a champion who hasn't had more than an average amount of losing in his or her story—myself included. And yet I meet people all the time who worry that they've been disqualified from winning because they've lost so many times. Are you kidding? Losing is your greatest asset, and I'll talk more about that in chapter 9. When I meet people who aren't losing enough, I immediately wonder why they haven't taken more risks, who has been insulating them from the possibility of failure, and what potential they still have hidden inside of them.

Of course losing is embarrassing. It's humiliating. But it also fuels us.

It changes us. It humbles us. And it plants in us the character we need to sustain the long-term kind of achievement we crave. If you're sick of losing, you're in the right place. What I'm about to share with you is a way to live that can help you become the winner you may have only dreamed you could one day be.

When I think about what happened that year at Nationals, all I can say is that I choked. It was my shot, and I blew it. You've probably had a moment like this, a moment where none of your excuses held up anymore and you knew that losing could only be your own fault. That was me at the end of Nationals that year. And as I sat in the embarrassment of that

moment, I realized something really important: I didn't want to be a loser anymore.

In fact, there was a specific moment I made this decision. It was after the competition, and I was at a victory party for Gordie McKellen, the men's national champion of the year. We were all relaxing, having a good time. At one point, one of the other skaters my age looked over at me.

"Hey, go grab me a beer," he said, pointing to the open cooler.

"Why don't you go grab your own beer?" I asked, a little confused about why he was bothering me for something he was perfectly capable of doing himself. He looked back at me and then back at the beer and then back at me.

"Because you have nothing to lose. I do," he said.

Suddenly I got it. Never have I felt the weight of losing so heavily, and never had it been more clear to me. I was over this. I was done being a loser. I didn't care what it took or how much it cost me. I was ready to be the kind of person worthy of the position I desired. I was ready to do the work. I was ready to change from the inside out. I was ready to become a winner. What I didn't know at that point was that I wasn't done losing yet.

Your Path to Victory

When I think back on my move to Wagon Wheel, I realize that this was the first big shift for me in my competitive career and

that it would never have happened if I had started out even moderately successful. If I had made it to Nationals the year that I didn't, for example, my parents never would have invested the resources for me to go to Wagon Wheel. I would have just stayed where I was. Have you ever stopped for a minute to think about how many things had to go wrong in your life for you to end up exactly where you are?

This is important because a lot of people wonder why the United States isn't as competitive in skating as it used to be. And I believe it's because we've lowered the bar as far as who goes to the National Championships. The best possible thing that could have happened to me was not making it. It changed the way I approached my skating and my commitment to get better. By allowing anyone who wants to compete to go to Nationals, we are robbing all skaters of developing that burning desire to win.

I say this to point out that no matter where you are today, this is your path to victory. It will be paved with so much disappointment, so much failure. You will question yourself and question your path. This is part of the process.

I often meet people who have lists of reasons why they will never be successful. They list their failures, their critics, and their setbacks. They talk to me about how they've wasted time. They tell me it's too late. And I tell them the same thing: The path to victory is the path you're on. It becomes a path to victory the moment you decide it does. You think that doing what it takes to win will be miserable, but the real misery

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comes when you lose because you weren't willing to do the simple things it takes to become a champion.

Honestly, I'm grateful for all of my losing. Without that experience, I wouldn't have any idea why it matters so much to be a winner. And I wouldn't know any of what I'm about to tell you—about how you can become the winner you wondered if it was even possible for you to be.