

LIVING WITH A SEAL

31 DAYS TRAINING WITH THE TOUGHEST
MAN ON THE PLANET

JESSE
ITZLER



CENTER
STREET

New York Boston Nashville

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This book is dedicated to my mom and dad, who have been at every game, every event, and every BIG moment in my life. Also, to my wife, who continues to teach me about unwavering support and love. Plus, she has the patience to put up with me.

Disclaimer

The events of this book have been re-created from memory and in some cases have been compressed to convey the substance of what occurred or was said. I tried to keep the time sequence of my experiences in order, but it's possible that events occurred either earlier or later in reality than they do in this story. Although every workout written is true and happened, it's important to note, I'm not recommending you do or try any of the workouts in this book. First off, I don't want anyone to get hurt. Second, who wants to get sued?

Like any activity involving speed, equipment, endurance, and environmental factors, the workouts described in *Living with a SEAL* pose some very serious risks. All readers should take full responsibility for their safety and know their limits. As a trainer, SEAL knew his stuff, and he factored into every single one of his workouts my level of experience, aptitude, training—and how much I could handle.

I kept a detailed diary during my time living with SEAL, which instantly became a blog. It was primarily for friends

and family, but as the insanity of my workouts grew, so did my audience. The result is this book.

You will notice in the following pages that the person with whom I trained is referred to only as “SEAL.” He asked that I not disclose his name. And he didn’t say please.

Introduction

People ask me why I hired SEAL. One answer is this: When it comes to physical fitness, I tend to be a creature of habit. I guess compared to most people my age, I was in excellent shape and in a great place in my personal life. At the time I was married (still am) to a fantastic woman, and we had our first beautiful eighteen-month-old son (two more since). I began running in 1992, just after I graduated from college. I've missed maybe a handful of days since. I've run eighteen New York City marathons in a row, and it's been the same drill every year. Training schedule—the same. Running route—the same. The store I buy bananas from the day before the race—the same. The Patsy's pizza I order the night before each race—the same.

I like routine.

And routine can be good, especially when it comes to working out. But routine can also be a rut.

Many of us live our lives on autopilot. We do the same thing every day; wake up, go to work, come home, have dinner. Repeat. I found myself drifting in that direction. It was as if my cruise control settings had been set and I wasn't

improving. I wanted to get off it; I wanted to shake things up in a big way. My Central Park West life and SEAL's nomadic take-no-prisoners life merging (or I should say, colliding) for a period of time was what I needed. It was unexpected, it was unique. It was insane (okay, I admit it), but research shows that stepping out of our routine in life is great for the body and spirit...the brain too. Mix it up! Do the outrageous; think out of the box. Life is short, why not? As SEAL says, "This ain't a dress rehearsal, bitch."

While this is a story about our month together, it's just as much a story about two people that had to step outside of their comfort zones. SEAL and me. He was as uncomfortable with doormen, chefs, and drivers as I was with sleeping in a chair and intentionally waking up in the middle of the night to run in the worst possible conditions. His no rhyme or reason approach to our workout schedule actually brought a lot of clarity into my life.

SEAL had something I wanted, but I just wasn't sure what it was. And I wanted to find out. Do you remember Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*? He had a very unorthodox approach to training. Daniel LaRusso, played by Ralph Macchio, wants to learn martial arts, but Mr. Miyagi starts him off with menial chores to help him. And Daniel unknowingly develops the defensive blocks through muscle memory, but what he eventually learns is a lot more than martial arts. That's kind of what I was looking for when I asked SEAL to move in and train me. I wanted to train my body, but also my mind and spirit. The difference was I wasn't training for protection or a trophy. And I had already gotten the girl. I just wanted to get better.

I've also always had an unorthodox approach to business and life in general. It's served me well. I don't believe in résumés in the traditional sense, I believe in life résumés. Do more. Create memories. Only when looking back on my successes and failures am I able to connect the dots. I could have never predicted or planned to go from being a rapper on MTV in the 1990s to eventually owning and operating my own private jet company. My normal has always been abnormal.

I don't know if I was thinking about my mortality, or fretting over how many more peak years I had left, or anything like that. I think I was just thinking that now was as good a time as any to shake things up. You know, to break up that *same* routine.

I believe the best ideas are the ones you don't spend too much time thinking through. My time with SEAL was no different and I got a lot more than I bargained for. Most of my successes in life have come from learning how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Like I said, I just want to get better.

Every day do something that makes you uncomfortable.

—SEAL

PROLOGUE

SEAL moved into my home to train me in December 2010. That winter went on to be one of the snowiest on record. Airports closed. Trains were delayed. A nor'easter dropped more than twenty inches of snow on New York City in one day. The winds were so strong they pushed the falling snow into drifts that measured up to four feet. City bus drivers abandoned their vehicles in the middle of the streets. So did regular drivers. Plows couldn't remove the snow for days. I was sure my mission with SEAL would be compromised. But that was before I knew him.

DAY 1

The Arrival

I'm trained to disappear.

—SEAL

New York City

14°

0638

I pour oatmeal into a bowl, fill the pot with water, light the stove, and set the timer. I click play on the remote and position Lazer, my eighteen-month-old son, so he can see his *Baby Einstein* video. I peek into the guest room to make sure the bed is made. My son is giggling, which comforts me. I check on my wife, Sara, who's still sleeping, and then recheck the guest room to make sure it's shipshape, or whatever the heck they say in the Navy. I hear the timer go off. I cut up some bananas and pour honey on them. I look at the clock on the microwave: 6:38 a.m.

ETA: twenty-two minutes.

I'm filled with nervous energy.

I sit with my son, feed him breakfast, and watch the rest of *Baby Einstein*. The bananas are still in my bowl. I'm not hungry. I go into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I push my hair back with my hands. I grin at my reflection to check my teeth. They're clean.

I go back to the living room.

I do as many push-ups as I can: twenty-two.

I look at the clock: 6:44 a.m.

What if he has trouble getting a cab? Does a guy like him even take a cab? Maybe he's going to run to my house. The plane might be delayed? He could've changed his mind? Maybe I should call. What am I talking about? The guy's probably parachuted into foreign countries; he has to know how to get to my house on time. Right?

But he *NEVER* asked for my address, *NEVER* inquired what to bring. He *wouldn't* give me his flight information and *didn't* request a car service. *NOTHING*. In fact, the only thing the man said was:

"I arrive at oh seven hundred." That's military time for 7:00 a.m.

* * *

I first saw "SEAL" at a twenty-four-hour relay race in San Diego. After several marathons, this was my first "ultra." I was on a team of six ultra-marathoners who would each take turns running twenty-minute legs. The objective: Run more miles than every other team in twenty-four hours.

There were teams registered from all over the country.

You know, friends coming together to test themselves physically and mentally. SEAL, however, didn't have a team. He didn't have friends. He was running the entire race... himself.

The event was low budget, really low budget. The entire course was set around a one-mile loop in an unlit parking lot near the San Diego Zoo. It was unsupported, meaning you bring your own supplies. Whatever you needed, you were responsible for.

My team and I flew in the night before to get ready. When we got there we walked the course and mapped out our strategy. Before we went to sleep, we laid out our race gear and supplies so we were ready to go when we woke up. Water. Gatorade. Bananas. PowerBars. Band-Aids. We were ready.

Before the race, we stretched in a small circle on the grass. I was nervous and excited, but I couldn't help notice the guy ten feet away. To say he stood out would be an understatement. For starters, he was the only African-American in the race. Secondly, he weighed over 260 pounds whereas most of the other runners weighed between 140 and 165 pounds. Third, whereas everyone else was talkative and friendly, this guy seemed pissed. I mean he looked very angry.

He just sat there all by himself in a folding chair with his arms crossed waiting for the race to start. No stretching, no prep, no fancy shoes, and no teammates. No smiling. He just sat quietly with a don't-fuck-with-me expression on his face. His supplies for twenty-four hours: one box of crackers and water. That's it. He laid them out next to his chair.

The guy was a cross between a gladiator and the G.I. Joe action hero my son has, but life size. He looked indestructible. Battle tested. Dangerous. Alone. Determined.

Even the way he spit was scary. If he hit you with it, it likely would leave a scar. He was intimidating. Physically, the man looked like someone sprayed muscle paint all over his body. Ripped. Flawless.

Once the race started, in between our individual legs of running, we stretched and stayed hydrated to avoid injury, and applied plenty of Vaseline. As a friend of mine likes to say: “Brother, ultras are chafey.” But as the race continued and I cheered on my teammates, I couldn’t help but keep tabs on the guy who was running alone. Who *was* this guy?

There was magnetism to his fury. Underneath his scowl I sensed something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Maybe it was a sense of honor or integrity. Or purpose. Yeah, that’s it. He ran with a sense of purpose that I couldn’t quite comprehend. He ran as though lives depended on it, like he was running into a burning house to save someone, a kitten or an old woman. With each stride he took it seemed like he was creating mini-earthquakes beneath his feet, but at all times his form was perfect, his eyes locked in a stare, a focus that was diamond-tip PRECISE. He just ran...checked his splits on his watch...and ran for a hundred miles straight.

When the twenty-four-hour race was over, I was cooked. My thighs were so tight I could barely walk a yard. As my teammates and I slowly gathered our extra sneakers, lawn

chairs, and personal belongings, I noticed him again, this massive, two-hundred-plus-pound block of carbon steel, being helped to the parking lot by a woman (whom I would later find out was his wife), looking like he just survived a plane crash.

I concluded two things:

1. I had never seen anyone like this.
2. I had to meet him.

Back home, after some investigating and some Googling, I was able to ascertain a few pertinent things about him, including the fact that he was a Navy SEAL, a highly decorated Navy SEAL at that. Then I tracked down a contact number and called him cold. He was on the West Coast.

This is a habit I have. When I see or read about someone interesting, I call them up and basically ask them to be my friend. My wife says it reminds her of middle school when you hand someone a note and ask, “Do you want to be my friend? Check yes or no.” Well, I guess I never outgrew that phase.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Is this SEAL?”

“That depends on who’s asking,” he said.

I hadn’t experienced these kind of nerves since I called Sue my senior year in high school to ask her to the prom. I started talking about the race and babbling on, until half-way through my rap I realized that I sounded like someone I would’ve hung up on. In fact, I wasn’t completely sure he

hadn't hung up—there was dead silence coming from his end of the phone.

This was way worse than the call to Sue.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Just give me fifteen minutes to propose something to you in person,” I said finally. “I’m in New York City but can fly out tomorrow.”

Silence.

“Hello?”

Silence.

“SEAL?”

Silence.

Finally: “You wanna come out . . . it’s on you,” he said.

Twenty-four hours later I was in California.

We met in a local restaurant in San Diego. After some small talk, which consisted of me talking and him saying nothing in response, I asked him to move into my house to train me.

He stared at me with cold, flat eyes. I couldn't tell if he thought I was nuts or if he was figuring out if I was worth his time. He was sizing me up.

One minute passed. Then another.

“Okay, I’ll do it with one condition,” he said in a tone that was slightly motivational in a psychopathic drill sergeant way. “You do everything I say.”

“Yes.”

“And that means EVERYTHING.”

“Okay.”

“I can wake you at any time; I can push you to any extreme.”

“Ummm.”

“NOTHING is off limits. NOTHING.”

“Well...”

“By the time we’re done you’ll be able to do a thousand push-ups in a day.”

“A thousand?”

This wasn’t going to be anything like the prom, I thought.

* * *

At exactly 7:00 a.m. there’s a knock on my door.

He has *NO luggage. NO suitcases. NO expression.* In spite of the fact that it’s December and it’s *freezing* out, he’s wearing *NO coat. NO hat. NO gloves.* And there’s *NO* greeting.

He simply says, “You ready?”

That’s it? No warm-up pitch? No “nice to see you again”? No “it’s cold out, huh?” Maybe something nice and easy, right down the middle? Instead, I get a Mariano Rivera cut fastball.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I say. “Anything you need, please feel free to help yourself. Make yourself at home. Our home is your home.”

“Nah, bro! Not at all, this is *your* home. I don’t have a home.”

I laugh.

SEAL doesn’t laugh.

“It was only an expression,” I answer. “Make yourself at home, that’s an expression.”

“I don’t operate in expressions, dude. I operate in actions. That needs to be clear immediately,” he says. “Understand?”

“Okay.”

“Huh?”

“Yes . . . sir?”

“I’m trained to disappear. You won’t EVER even know when I’m here.”

“Okay.”

“Ah’ite. Let’s get into this shit. Meet me here in nine minutes. And don’t bring your cowfuck expressions.”

Cowfuck?

I change into my standard cold-weather workout gear, which consists of two sweatshirts, two hats, and gloves. I walk back out to the front door, where SEAL is already standing, looking at his watch. It’s fourteen degrees out and nippy. He’s wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and a knit hat. Nothing else.

“Man, I may need to borrow some gloves,” says SEAL.

“You *may* need gloves?”

“Yeah, or some kinda mittens or some shit like that.”

“That’s it. Only gloves?”

“That’s it.”

“It’s fourteen degrees outside,” I say.

“To you it’s fourteen degrees ’cause you’re telling yourself it’s fourteen degrees!”

“No. It really is. It’s fourteen degrees. Like that’s the real actual temperature outside. It says so on my computer.”

SEAL pauses for a moment like I may have disappointed him. “On your computer, huh?”

He begins to laugh, but it’s a haunting laugh, like the Count on *Sesame Street*.

“The temperature is what you think it is, bro, not what your computer thinks it is. If you think it’s fourteen degrees, then it’s fourteen degrees. Personally, I’m looking at it like it’s in the mid-fifties.”

Rather than argue—after all, we’re still just getting to know each other—I just say: “Got it.”

“You ever spent any time in freezing water, Jesse?” SEAL asks.

I’m thinking to myself, Like on purpose? But I respond with a “no.”

“Well, is it freezing? OR is your *mind* just saying it’s freezing? Which is it?” He laughs again. “Control your *mind*, Jesse.”

“Got it.” (I’m going to have to put that on the to-do list: *Control mind*.)

“Exactly. Enjoy this shit. If you want it to be seventy and sunny... it’s seventy and sunny. Just run. The elements are in your mind. I don’t ever check the temperature when I run. Who gives a fuck what the temperature on the computer says? The computer isn’t out there running, is it?”

He’s got me there, but instead of saying “got it” again, I try to keep the banter going.

“Does that work the same way in heat? I mean, if it’s ninety-five degrees outside, can you make it snow in your mind?”

“Nah, man, it’s a one-way system, bro. Cold to hot only. When it’s hot outside... it’s just fucking hot!”

If one of my friends tried to give me the same logic, I’d laugh, but coming from SEAL’s mouth, I almost believe him.

However, I can feel the draft coming from our windows and I don't care what SEAL says—it really is fourteen degrees outside.

“Well, then, what's the strategy in the heat?”

“In extreme heat, it's a totally different mind-set, bro. You have to get medieval. Embrace it! Grind it out. Think about how others are suffering. Enjoy the pain.”

“Yours or theirs?” I ask.

SEAL levels me with his stare.

“Both,” he says. Then SEAL nods at me, the signal that it's “go” time.

We head to Central Park and run six miles at a 9:20-mile pace. I think SEAL wants to feel me out. Although I am an experienced marathoner, I was never a fast runner. I can run at a seven-minute pace, but I prefer not to. I like to take my time running; my pace is more the you-should-be-able-to-talk-to-a-friend-while-running pace. It's more enjoyable. I'm way more of an endurance guy than a sprint guy. I find that endurance running is more of a mental challenge than a physical challenge, and I'm pretty good at blocking out the pain and boredom of long runs.

This pace suits me well. I think to myself, I can do this.

An hour later . . .

After a warm shower and quickly returning some work emails, I give SEAL a quick tour of our apartment. We live at 15 Central Park West on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The building has been written and blogged about as a famous New York City building and also been featured for its amazing views, architecture, and residents.

Many of the world's top CEOs, athletes, and entertainers live in the building. I convinced Sara two years ago we should move in because the building had a pool. "We can swim every day, honey." Well, here we are two years later. We bought the apartment but we have not been in the pool once.

Although my wife, Sara, and I don't consider ourselves to be "fancy," the building sure is. In fact, when we first moved in, the elevator concierge (not the elevator operator; the elevator *conciierge*) told me to get off of the elevator because the elevators are "only for residents." I guess I didn't look the part of resident in my ski hat and shorts.

I start the tour by showing SEAL how to use the remotes for the television. I figure that is something a guest who is staying with us for over a month will want to know, right?

"This is how you turn it on," I say, pointing to the power button.

"We won't be watching much TV," he says, interrupting me.

"Okay then... Moving on," I say.

I set the remote down and then lead him over to the kitchen. If we aren't going to be watching television, then we certainly will be eating, I assume. I pull out the first drawer.

"So this is where all the forks, spoons, and knives are," I say.

"I won't be using your utensils," he says.

Huh? I close the drawer.

Maybe I'll have more luck in the laundry room.

As I am about to show him how to use the washer and dryer, he interrupts me again and says, "Yo, man, you can skip all this tour shit. Just tell me how to get to the gym."

Okay. The tour is officially over and we head to the gym.

For the first time I can see SEAL's front teeth as a smile starts to form. He is ecstatic; I can see the change in his expression just from walking inside of the gym. It's almost like watching *The Wizard of Oz* for the first time when you see the screen go from black and white to color. It's a whole new world. He walks over to the pull-up bar, jumps up, grabs the bar, and hangs. He starts to swing and swing some more and swing until he finally jumps off. I guess he approves because his smile has grown.

"This is perfect. You ready?" he asks.

"For what?"

"Your pulls."

"You mean like right now?"

"Give me ten. All the way down and all the way up. Let's see where your pull-up game is at."

I jump up and grab the bar and pull my two hundred pounds of body weight up until my chin is over the bar. "One."

I go down. When I get to number eight, I start kicking my legs around frantically to try to get some momentum. I need to get my chin over this damn bar, but I can't. I drop to the floor. SEAL tells me to take a forty-five-second break and do it again.

Forty-five seconds later I jump back up and grab the bar. I've never been good at doing pull-ups. In fact, I hate doing them. Somehow I manage to squeak out six more before I drop back to the ground. This time I think for good. SEAL tells me to take another forty-five seconds and then do it again.

Another forty-five seconds go by and this time I'm able to get three solid pull-ups in before I drop to the ground. Each time I'm dropping, my legs give out a little more. That's seventeen pull-ups. I'm *done*. I'm literally maxed out. I don't think I have ever done seventeen pull-ups so fast, or *ever*, for that matter. I grab my left bicep with my right hand and my right bicep with my left hand and squeeze. It feels like there are nails in my biceps.

"Seventeen! Cool, that's my max number. I didn't think I could even do that. Amazing! Let's head back upstairs."

As I start to look up, SEAL is staring at me with a blank expression... deadpan. "We're going to stay here until you do a hundred."

WHAT?

"I can't do a hundred. That's impossible," I say.

"You better find a way," he says to me like a father might tell his son to clean his bedroom. "You got a shitty-ass attitude."

I do one and drop to the floor.

I walk around the gym trying to delay the inevitable. My arms sag at my sides and SEAL watches me. I can't procrastinate any longer. I return to the pull-up bar. I do another one and drop to the ground. I take another lap around the gym

and I'm back to the pull-up bar. I drop. Lap...Pull-up...
Drop...Lap...Pull-up...Drop...

Ninety minutes later I'm on ninety-seven.
Training is definitely under way.

Workout totals: 6 miles and 100 pull-ups

No Novocain

I like to sit back and enjoy the pain. I earned it.

—SEAL

I grew up on Long Island in Roslyn, New York, with two older sisters and a brother. I was the youngest by five years. As suburban as you can get, Roslyn has developments of houses that all are pretty much the same with connected backyards that were patrolled by an army of kids my age. My mom owned a cowbell. I could be six or seven houses away and I'd hear my mom's bell calling me home. I was trained like a cow; it was slightly embarrassing. The rule was: Do your homework and you can go outside, but when you hear the bell, you'd better come home and you'd better be home in five minutes. My mom was the most unconditionally loving mom, but my mom was a hard-ass. Nobody messed with her. I've never heard her curse, but she has this look that she'd give you: her go-to move. Silence. It got me every time.

My mom was also something of a dichotomy when it came to traditional child healthcare. On one hand, she'd let me eat cheeseburgers, bacon, ice cream, and Oreo cookies, whatever I wanted, and all at once; but she was freaked out by X-ray machines, fluoride, and Novocain. She didn't think there had been enough research and testing done on certain things in the 1970s, and she didn't want me to be the lab rat. I got my first X-ray only after they invented that big lead vest they put on you, and she thought fluoride was just the

most toxic thing. Not having X-rays and fluoride in my life was easy to take. What was hard was no Novocain.

My dentist's name was Henry Schmitzer, and his office was about a forty-five-minute drive from our house. I guess he was the only dentist my mom could find who would drill a kid's mouth without an anesthetic. Henry might have been Laurence Olivier's inspiration for the character he played in *Marathon Man*.

So while all of my friends were getting gassed-up, pain-free, and lollipoped visits to their dentists around the corner, I'd be sitting in the back of the car for forty-five minutes, staring out the window, sweating, thinking...we are actually driving out of our way for this shit. That sound, and smell, like burning bone, of the drill. The anticipation was grueling, to say the least. It was a full-on event for me. The walk from the parking lot to the office always sparked thoughts and temptations to just run away as fast as I could. But my mother would give me a sympathetic smile as she held the door for me to go inside—she really believed she was doing the best for me.

Inside, Schmitzer the motherfucker, would start drilling my mouth. (I'm literally holding my mouth as I'm writing this.) The taste of that fire, the sound, the excruciating pain, and my mouth would be sore forever. It was crazy. You'd think that would have been motivation to brush better, but it always seemed like I had at least one cavity every checkup.

My dad was basically the complete opposite from Mom, in a go-with-the-flow type of way. He owned a plumbing supply store in Mineola and worked six days a week (a half day on Saturday). Even with all the time he invested at work, he

was a hands-on dad. He showed up for every game, every event, and made it a point to be home for family dinner every night.

At home he was like a mad scientist—he had a workshop in his basement, and that was his spot. He wasn't into watching sports or hanging out with friends, he liked to invent. When the movie *Back to the Future* came out and “Doc” created the Flux Capacitor . . . I was like, “*That’s my dad!!*”

I remember one time in elementary school when I had to make a diorama. The assignment was simple: Take a shoebox and create a replica of your own house. Well, by the time my dad “helped out,” my diorama had running water and electricity. I kid you not. You could also push a button and the little garage door on the diorama would open.

I definitely think I got my creativity from my dad. And as far as I know he’s pro-Novocain, but unfortunately he wasn’t the one driving me to the dentist.

The part of me that would grow up to hire a Navy SEAL, that came from Mom.