

Working the Grind in Graduate School: Lessons from a Big Ten Athlete

by Courtney Yaeger



Photograph by Elizabeth Boyle

As an athlete, you learn how to fight: fight for position, fight for each point, fight to the finish. The struggles of sport lend themselves to references of war and pain: competition is a battlefield with only one winner. Everyone can appreciate the toughness—and sometimes sheer guts—that athletes exhibit. But even the most enthusiastic spectators often overlook the preparation that goes into that fight. Every moment leading up to competition is precious time where athletes try to outwork an invisible opponent, in hopes of tipping the scale in their favor when game day arrives. The best athletes give themselves over to a daily grind, where the battles are small, constant fights towards self-improvement. But the daily grind isn't just for athletes: it's for anyone who wants to be a true expert and the best version of themselves.

Learning to work the daily grind is still one of the greatest lessons I have ever learned. Although undergraduate classes and lab work undoubtedly gave me a good foundation for success in a PhD program, the best preparation for graduate school stemmed from my experience on the University of Illinois women's cross country and track team. I learned everything I needed to know from the daily grind of being a Big Ten athlete. I learned how to put myself in a position for improvement by applying a strong work ethic that guaranteed positive results (or at least a few). There really is no secret to success; instead, like an athlete that outworks his or her opponent, you can work yourself to the top of your graduate class, and into a good position in your field.

Luckily you don't need to be athletic to learn how to apply a daily grind to your life, but you do need to have clear goals—and the motivation to reach them. I joined my cross country and track team optimistic that someday I would be on our Big Ten squad, and I hoped I could eventually reach the podium at a conference championship. My goals were anchored in my love for running; I loved running every day, I loved the competition, and I loved the feeling that I was always improving. Having passion is a terrific foundation: there is possibly nothing more motivating than deeply caring about what you do. Similarly, I built my goals for grad school around my passion for neuroscience. I love the possibility of discovering something new, combining techniques in creative ways, and believing that I am making a difference in our understanding of how the brain works. I wanted to work in a cutting-edge research lab, publish in a high-level journal, procure my own funding, end with a solid dissertation, and move on to a postdoctoral position in a well-respected lab. These are undoubtedly lofty goals, but so were the goals I had as a novice freshman in the Big Ten. If I could go from the bottom to the top of the Big Ten, I could go from being an inexperienced student to being an accomplished researcher.

However ambitious or numerous your goals may be, you start by forming a good plan: you need to come up with a routine that directs your everyday work towards your bigger goals. This step was easy as a long-distance runner, because we were given a pre-made plan by our coaches. Everything the team

did fall within the categories of running, lifting, or recovery. But these simple-sounding words quickly became a staggering number of smaller tasks: “running” could refer to warming up, drills, workout distances and paces, a set number of miles, strides or sprints, and cool-downs. Each of these little steps played important roles in helping us reach our goals of being better, more competitive athletes. Still, there was so much complexity to all the different parts of our training that it was overwhelming. It took my entire freshman year to figure out what I was supposed to be doing every day, on and off the track. And then it took my second year to get in the habit of actually accomplishing all of it.

In retrospect, I had the same feeling in my first year of grad school. That’s to be expected: you have to get your bearings before you can do anything else (and do it well). It’s much more difficult to form a routine as a self-directed grad student, but you can look to your program requirements, your mentor, and your peers for guidance. Broadly, you will have your program’s guidelines (including class work and qualifying exams), thesis work completed under your advisor’s guidance, and professional development. But just as with the word “running,” these are broad, sweeping terms with many components to consider. Class work might include studying each day to maintain a good G.P.A., practicing your presentation skills and writing, and establishing good ties with your instructors. Thesis work should involve knowing your field’s literature, running research experiments and evaluating data, learning new data collection techniques, writing papers and grants, building relationships with the members of your thesis committee, and upholding good communication with your advisor. Professional development will likely entail attending talks and seminars, staying up-to-date with current literature, and networking with other students and professors. With your program requirements and your own broader goals in mind, you can make a plan to make sure you are being efficient and making progress towards your degree every day.

Especially at the onset of grad school, your self-made plan will seem daunting; every goal you set is suddenly made up of a thousand parts, making it seem impossible to finish anything. But this is nothing to be intimidated by, because each of those little pieces is an opportunity to improve. Working thoroughly on each part *is* progress, a battle against your own invisible opponent. In cross country and track, the best athlete is not necessarily the one who is the most talented; instead, the best athlete is the one who works the hardest and wants victory the most. This is where the daily grind and a good, fighting attitude come into play. The daily grind is about attacking your routine so you get the most out of your work. Athletics taught me to push myself, and push harder than I had the day before. In a race, you charge to the finish line, forcing your tired legs to go as fast as they can, and you have a feeling like you’re digging deep for every last bit of energy. You “leave everything on the track,” as many coaches say.

As a graduate student, you apply yourself mentally: staying focused and keeping your mind constantly working will feel uncomfortable and even tiring. But being uncomfortable is actually a sign that you’re working hard enough. It means you’re getting out of your comfort zone to improve, like an athlete who pushes herself in practice. Perhaps you read another chapter and take notes to be sure you understand it, and you study for part of every day to stay on top of your work. You take notes during each talk you attend. You approach faculty members with questions and ideas. You practice your presentations at home or with a friend. You might spend late nights or weekends at school to finish papers or experiments. With this kind of fierce dedication, you will become familiar with the feeling of working your hardest each day, and giving your best effort to everything you do will become a regular habit.

It should be noted that I don't recommend charging headfirst into everything; part of succeeding at the daily grind requires working 'smarter.' You want to apply your energy in an efficient way; everything you do should be done well without overexerting yourself. Runners do not sprint every run; they push the pace on good days and take it easier on days they feel tired. Grad school is the same kind of long race; you don't want to run out of steam too early. You want to maintain a steady pace through your workload. Know when you've hit your limit and either need to move on or give yourself some time to decompress. There have been times where my roommates would tell me to pick my head off the table, open my eyes long enough to get into bed, and get some rest. Ideally, you want to spend your time and energy in ways that allow you to put a lot of work each day without being completely spent.

As tough as that may seem, the hardest part about being a graduate student might be that no one is going to make you be proactive. Your advisor will hopefully keep you on track, but it will be up to you to build your own plan and manage your own progress. To do this effectively, you have to learn how to accurately evaluate your progress and to provide your own constructive criticism. This will require you to get in the habit of analyzing your own work without bias. What do you need to be improving on? And how will you accomplish this? Are you stuck and need someone else's help or guidance? Should you be looking for more opportunities to capitalize on? It's not always easy to admit, or even realize, that you could be doing a better job in your studies or research; you will have to learn to be critical and tough without being down on yourself.

Remember that asking for help or working on a weakness is just another opportunity to improve. Everything you have set out to do in graduate school is your own doing and for your own personal gain. When you're feeling discouraged, don't forget to look back at how far you've come. And while you're working on those thousand little parts and making small steps towards your goals, it's likely no one will cheer you on or congratulate you on each small accomplishment. This is why it's so important to keep your passion for what you do, because positive feedback will have to be largely self-generated. You should also seek feedback from your professors, your advisor, and even other grad students. Seeking consistent evaluation will help you keep a strong grasp on your work and remind you that you are constantly making progress.

If you approach grad school like a Big Ten athlete approaches Nationals, you will get everything you hope for out of your degree, and you will put yourself in a position to be the equivalent of a Division I athlete for your field. Repeating the steps of setting goals, making a routine, working the grind, and evaluating your progress will give you confidence in your abilities and keep you on a path to success. It doesn't matter where you start or how high your goals may be, fighting to reach them and grinding away at your goals each day will get you where you want to be. Ultimately, you'll find that fighting for your passion will make your graduate experience satisfying; if you can make a habit out of giving your best effort, you will be prepared to fight for goals in all areas of your life, and you will find success in anything you set out to accomplish.

Courtney Yaeger is a doctoral candidate in neuroscience at UCLA. Her research is focused on analyzing brain circuitry throughout development. She hopes that her work will uncover how the developing brain changes with experience and may help form an understanding of disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, and autism. She still loves to run and will compete in the 2015 Boston Marathon.

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