

**WHITEPAPER**

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**THE PATH TO  
PROFESSIONALISM  
IN SALES**

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## The Path to Professionalism in Sales

*Good evening. Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, and a terrorist who is responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.*

**(President Barak Obama,  
11:30 PM ET, May 1, 2011 in a national  
television address)**

In the days following this announcement, we learned what happened during this clandestine operation, as details and pictures began to leak.

Cryptic military terms like JSOC, Operation Neptune's Spear, Crankshaft, and Ghost Hawk crept into our vocabulary. We saw video of the President and key cabinet members witnessing this mission in real time. This was the pinnacle of high-tech warfare.

In his book, *SEAL Target Geronimo*, Chuck Pfarrer, best-selling author and former assault element commander of SEAL Team Six, describes publishable details of that mission and the events that led to its success. Consider some highlights from this text:

- "It takes more than two years of intense, nonstop training to earn the basic SEAL qualification of 5326, combat swimmer. From that point on, a rookie SEAL enters one of the most rigorous meritocracies conceived by man. A SEAL is judged not only by the missions he has undertaken but also by his courage, skill, physical ability, and character." (p. 1)
- "Screening for SEAL Team Six ... is competitive and by invitation only. Only the best ... are allowed to inquire about the program. After a lengthy interview process, the most experienced and highly regarded operators are allowed to undergo rigorous 'selection courses'—punishing training regimens that winnow out all but the most proficient, accomplished, and dedicated." (p. 34)
- Planning, preparation, and practice for Operation Neptune's Spear consumed nearly five months.
- Things went awry as a top-secret helicopter crashed, yet the SEALs were prepared for this. This is reflected in the attitude, "Everything that can go wrong will go wrong, and at the worst possible moment. Prepare for the unexpected." (p. 32)

- When SEALs stand down from missions, they study and train: “They went for a month of performing weapons and equipment refurbishment and sent operators to various schools to keep their skills sharp.” (p. 153) In their off-time, SEALs run marathons, compete in triathlons, and earn graduate degrees.
- Chuck Pfarrer spent one-third of this book providing a backdrop of information on the Middle East and its relevant history since WWII. Pfarrer’s profiles of Osama bin Laden and his chief lieutenants reveal an insight into the psyche of his enemies that exemplifies the skill and intellect of a highly trained profiler.

In reading his account of this mission and its heroes, I was struck by two things. First, these are professionals who are defined by their courage, dedication, commitment, and discipline. They hold themselves to the highest standards and accept nothing less. Second, implicit in this story of valor is a model of professionalism that forms the spine of all professions: preparation, planning, practice, performance and post-performance review. Whether it is medicine, sports, performing arts, the trades, or business, there is a prescribed path to professionalism in those fields.

### **The path to professionalism is open to all that raise the bar on their professions, especially salespeople.**

Professionals prepare by studying, building the necessary foundational skills, and developing the core competencies for their careers. They are serious students of their craft. Professionals plan for maximum control and achievement of their objectives. They practice for proficiency, which is evident in their real-time performance, and once they complete their mission, they review their performance, learning from their mistakes while aspiring to improve.

It is no secret that the sales profession lacks some degree of the occupational esteem of medicine, law, and public accounting. All are knowledgebased professions; so, what is the problem? Many salespeople have contributed to this image problem by their failure to conduct themselves professionally. Imagine these scenarios: A doctor prescribes a less-effective medicine because he has a monthly commitment to the pharmaceutical companies; an accountant provides outdated tax advice because she fails to remain current on tax law; or a lawyer engages in unethical practices merely to win a case. These do happen occasionally and in some form, which gives the proverbial black eye to that profession. There are salespeople that do the same: They pitch the wrong product because they have a quota to make; they offer bad advice because they have not attended the latest product training; and they engage in less-than-ethical

behavior to close the deal. All professions are plagued by less-than-professional behavior. Most have oversight committees that monitor this behavior. Professional selling is regulated by customers. Alienated customers reject the unprofessional salesperson, but the salesperson moves on to another account. Every time a salesperson alienates a customer with unprofessional behavior it affects all salespeople. It diminishes our profession.

On the other hand, there are many salespeople that hold themselves to higher standards, commit to excellence in their field, and create maximum value for their customers. They are professionals in every sense of the word. There is a key training point here:

**If you treat sales as a profession, other people will treat you as a professional.**

This begs the question, “What is a professional?” Most definitions of “professional” include these descriptors: possesses a high level of skill or specialized expertise for which others are willing to pay; holds oneself to standards of excellence; and practices ethically. Unfortunately, there are some arbitrary definitions of professionalism that sometimes relegate it to you-know-it-when-you-see-it. Several myths about professionalism contribute to its sometimes fuzzy definition. For example,

- *Dedicating yourself to a career makes you a professional.* Being in a profession for a lengthy period of time does not make you a professional; it simply means that you are a survivor.
- *Joining a profession qualifies you as a professional.* Labeling yourself a professional does not make it so. You must *earn* this designation, and it is generally awarded by the people that you serve.
- *Earning a lot of money makes you a professional.* This, too, is false; it simply means you are skilled at generating an income. That alone does not define professionalism. If it did, we would eliminate teachers and a host of other public service employees from the ranks of professionals.

In our best practices research, any time customers used “professional” to describe the top achievers we were studying, we drilled down on their definition of professionalism. As they expounded, words like integrity, authenticity, and knowledge dominated their responses. One buyer even said that a professional has the courage to persist in the face of resistance, but how and why the salesperson persists affects the buyer’s response. If the salesperson persists when the buyer says “no” and should have said “yes” (because it would benefit the buyer), the buyer defined that as persistence. If the salesperson persists when the buyer rejects

the offer because the salesperson needs to make a sale that day, the respondent defined that as “pushy.” It depends for whom you are persisting—you or the buyer. A good physician makes his or her best case for a specific treatment, but would respect the patient’s right to refuse the procedure. Salespeople must adopt this standard as well. Make your best case, answer questions, respond to doubts, and respect the customer’s right to choose. If this strikes you as too soft, you may want to challenge your attitude about the purpose of selling: Is it to move product or create value for the customer?

When customers, peers, and bosses say, “You’re a real pro,” there is merit to their claim. You earned this reputation by winning their respect and trust. You likely traveled the path to professionalism: preparation, planning, practice, performance, and post-performance review.

### Preparation

Professionals live the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared—simple and effective. This means study and training. Tradespeople attend classes and skill-building sessions as apprentices before they qualify as professionals. Medical professionals, athletes, and musicians study and train for years before they are called professionals. This process includes a combination of mental and physical preparation. Musicians must understand and be able to read the music that they physically play. Electricians must know about electricity before they handle wires. Athletes must understand and know their position before they train at it. Even though preparation appears as our first topic, this does not imply a chronological progression that once you have studied and trained you are finished preparing. Preparation is getting ready and staying ready. You may have finished your schooling, but your real education is beginning. This is why graduation is called commencement: It is the beginning of the rest of your learning.

### Study

*The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.*

#### Socrates

This involves the on-boarding process that most salespeople go through when joining an organization and the ongoing professional development that keeps them at the ready. As with any journey, the first step begets the second step which begets the third step and so on throughout the journey. Your preparation continues throughout your career because you are never a finished product. You evolve throughout your career or stagnate and render yourself irrelevant. Study is not a one-time thing; it is an ongoing priority. Fewer than 7% of the people I train can tell me the name of the last book they read on their profession. Reading one sales book is not the complete book of knowledge that you need of your

profession. Reading one book is the one step on your journey, followed by ongoing and regular, professional study.

This reminds me of my reaction to completing my first psychology course in college. I felt capable to diagnose any mental condition that I might encounter. When I completed my graduate work, I realized how much more I had to learn. This realization motivated me to continue to study and read voraciously. It was a positive streak of “insecurity,” or maturity, which nudged me to remain on the path of continuous development throughout my career. I view myself as still under construction.

Begin your professional study with the openness, curiosity, and innocence of the beginner’s mind. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” (Shunryu Suzuki) This humility will enable you to fill in your knowledge gaps without preconceived ideas.

Professional study includes product and company knowledge, customer knowledge, and competitive intelligence. This enables you to understand the content and context within which your customers make buying decisions. This ongoing study of your value, customer needs, and market pressures keeps you nimble and relevant. Your success will, in large part, depend on your ability to leverage your knowledge to adapt to a world that is constantly changing. If you are not changing—improving your knowledge and skill—as your world changes, you fall behind, and that is a self-inflicted wound.

**Company and product expertise**—this means understanding your value and being able to communicate this to your customers.

- How do you bring value to your customers along the three dimensions of value: products, company, and people? This forms the basis for your customer messaging campaign and your value-added sales presentations.
- What is your unique selling proposition? This is how you will stand out in the customer’s mind and make it easier for them to recognize and appreciate your value.
- What is the long-term outcome for the customer in choosing your solution? This is your value proposition and will vary depending on the customer.
- How do you assure customers of your proven value? This means detailing your best practices and citing proof sources for the customer. Advise and reassure them of the guaranteed impact you will have on their business.

**Customer knowledge**—this means a total immersion into your customer's world. Total immersion into your customer's world is the process of learning to think as customers think, feel what they feel, and to view things from the inside-out. When you perceive your value-added as value-received, you have begun the process of immersion.

*Unless you really understand others, you can hardly attain your own self-understanding.*

### **The Book of Five Rings**

Miyamoto Musashi

- What is your customer's objective? What does this customer want to gain or avoid with this purchase? Why is this a priority for the customer? What are the driving forces behind the customer's needs? This includes needs that are stated as well as unknown and unarticulated needs. There are times that customers do not know what they do not know.
- Study the content and context in which your buyer makes these decisions. The content is the what they want to accomplish while the context describes the climate in which they make these decisions—competitive forces, market conditions, political atmosphere, etc.

**Competitive intelligence**—this means becoming your opponent, which transcends a superficial knowledge of their business. Be aware of your competition, but do not beware of them. There is no reason to fear your competition if you do your research. Knowing your competition takes the boogey out of the boogey man. Ulysses S. Grant is attributed with saying, "Respect, but don't hold your enemy in awe or you will lack the will to defeat them."

Knowing your competition has a practical advantage. Eighty-two percent of salespeople fail to differentiate themselves from the competition. This stems from their inability to answer the question: What are your definable and defensible differences?

Where is your competition strong and weak? Study all disciplines in their companies: purchasing, logistics, R&D, financial strength, credit, customer service, field sales coverage, technical support, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and web presence.

Use the three dimensions of value (product feature and benefits, company value-added services, and personal commitments) to compare your solution to their solution. Be brutally frank in your assessments. This is no time for groupthink.

Use all of the resources available to you: customers, peers, management, suppliers, your purchasing group, the Internet, the competitor's website, trade association data, and friendly competitors.

Information mining is an ongoing effort, as all of your study must be. Markets are volatile. Today's leader may be tomorrow's laggard. Today's weak player may be tomorrow's winner.

## Training

*Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.*

### The Art of War, Sun Tzu

This includes product schools and professional sales training. Attending one seminar does not make you an expert. When I took flying lessons, it took several hands-on training sessions to acquire the skill of landing an airplane in wind shear and cross winds. Ongoing sales seminars and product training are essential components of your annual preparation. This reality was confirmed in our best practices research of top-achieving salespeople—those salespeople who operate in the top 10% of their sales forces. These experienced and successful salespeople attend an average of 41.5 hours of ongoing training annually; with 87% receiving ongoing product training, and 72% receiving ongoing sales training. These are salespeople who have already distinguished themselves among their peers. They continue to train, much like professional athletes that spend the offseason preparing for the upcoming season. Accountants and architects are required to attend training every year to earn CEU credits to maintain their professional certifications. Many physicians use their day-off every week to attend medical seminars to stay current in their practices.

Today, corporate America is studying and emulating U.S. military training. The entire November, 2010 issue of the Harvard Business Review is dedicated to the study of military leadership. Military life-and-death training is respected for its effectiveness. For four years, I witnessed first-hand—initially as a trainee and later as a trainer—the efficacy with which the U.S.

Army prepares and maintains a professional fighting force. In a recent conversation with the person in charge of global training for all combat engineers, I learned that they are already preparing for training the soldier of 2020. What is your training time horizon?

The dedication to training pervades across all branches of the United States Military: "During times of peace the most important task of any military is to prepare for war ... all peacetime activities should focus on

achieving combat readiness ... the purpose of all training is to develop forces that can win ...” (Warfighting: The U.S. Marine Corps Book of Strategy, by General A.M. Gray, Commandant)

### Planning

Imagine that the top-ranked Chicago Symphony Orchestra is touring and your city is on their list. You purchase advance tickets and plan for an evening filled with classical masterpieces performed by professional musicians that have invested much of their lives preparing for this evening.

The audience welcomes the renowned conductor. He bows graciously and then announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, we do not have a program planned for this evening. We thought we might entertain your requests. If we know the song, we will be thrilled to perform it for you.” Imagine the bitter disappointment at this lack of professional planning. People would storm the ticket window, demanding a full refund of their ticket prices.

Not to worry. Professionals do not disappoint this way.

Planning and preparation mean twice the performance. No one plans to fail, but many fail to plan. For successful people, planning is the link between their dreams and reality. Salespeople plan strategically and tactically.

#### Strategic planning: chasing the right type of business

This happens when sales managers clearly articulate the type of business that supports the company’s objectives. They communicate clearly and often the answer to these questions: “What is fundamentally good business for our company?” and “Why are we focused on this type of business?” Peter Drucker understood the value of communicating strategy when he wrote, “The foundation for effective leadership is thinking through the organization’s mission, designing it and establishing it, clearly and visibly.” According to research, only 19% of employees are able to translate the company’s objectives into actionable steps. This planning breakdown is a failure at the management level. Professional managers communicate the mission and make sure its goals translate into actionable steps. When managers engage salespeople with the what and why of the mission, they build commitment, not just compliance. Armed with this information, salespeople can then engage in tactical planning.

#### Tactical planning: chasing the right accounts

This is selecting accounts that specifically parallel the answers to the good-business questions: “In my territory, who specifically meets our

criteria for good business?” Once these high-value targets are established, salespeople can then begin their account strategy and call planning.

From our research, we discovered that fewer than one-in-four salespeople has a detailed plan of attack for their number one account. Additionally, we found that less than 10% of the general sales population routinely plans sales calls. I am convinced that these two failures to plan contribute significantly to the dearth of occupational prestige that plagues selling. Too many salespeople merely show up to visit customers.

Our research further discovered that top-achieving salespeople engage in tactical planning in significant numbers: 84% have a plan-of-attack for their high-value targets; 86% use itineraries; and 95% plan their sales calls. These are true sales professionals, and their benchmark practices are the beacons of excellence that shine for other salespeople that want to be known as professionals.

As I write this whitepaper, two NFL teams, the New England Patriots and the New York Giants, are preparing for Super Bowl XLVI. The athletes have invested a lifetime preparing for this stage. They have practiced their positions, lifted countless tons of weights, studied game films of their opponent, and sweated over their game plans. Imagine if one team showed up with no game plan, fully confident that they could wing it. It would result in a blow-out victory that no one would enjoy—winners or losers.

Had SEAL Team Six not invested decades of preparation and months of planning for Operation Neptune’s Spear, opting to sweep in and play it by ear, President Obama would have announced a much different outcome that May evening of 2011.

These examples are ridiculous to the point of absurdity. Yet, every day countless tens-of-thousands of salespeople without a plan show up at customers’ doors like Chamber of Commerce representatives. Professionals are serious students of their professions. They prepare. They study. They train. They plan. Then, they practice.

### Practice

If preparation and planning mean twice the performance, then preparation, planning, and practice mean three times the performance. As legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said, “Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.”

In his best-seller, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell reveals the 10,000-Hour Rule. His research uncovered a selfless common denominator among top achievers. Citing psychological studies of virtuoso musicians and biographies of The Beatles, Mozart, and Silicon Valley Jedis like Bill Gates, Bill Joy, and Steve Jobs, Gladwell spelled out the connection between mastery and practice. He discovered that these achievers logged 10,000 hours of practice before they achieved mastery of their professions. His findings confirm that study builds knowledge while practice builds proficiency.

Gladwell translates the 10,000-Hour Rule into roughly ten years of preparation and practice to achieve mastery. He did not find that merely being in a profession for ten years guaranteed mastery, only that it provided the environment for rigorous practice and skill building.

### **Practice and study daily to master professional selling.**

*Thus a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning.*

#### **The Art of War, Sun Tzu**

From our research, we discovered that the average salesperson spends 37.7 hours weekly in non-selling activities. This represents a whopping 72% of their time doing things other than selling in a face-to-face meeting with customers. If the average salesperson were to divert one hour daily from these 37.7 hours into professional development and practice and couple it with the average of 14.6 hours per week in face-to-face selling, this salesperson would achieve Gladwell's 10,000-Hour Rule in the ten years he proposes that it takes to achieve mastery.

Skill and proficiency come from practice. A friend of mine, Colonel Barry Bruns (USAF, retired) shared with me his wisdom and experience on building proficiency in skills:

*Ben Franklin is often quoted, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." I learned it as "Tell someone something, they'll forget. Show them, they'll remember some of it. Involve them and they'll develop understanding." When I have occasion to share that with a group, normally one in which we are training via classroom followed by practice, I ask for a show of hands of who would take their family on an aircraft whose pilot I'd just told how to fly. How many would take their family on the aircraft if I'd showed the pilot how to fly with a Power Point presentation? Never any hands. The example*

*makes this obvious. Intellectual knowledge is only part of the equation. It takes practice, repetition, and hard-nosed assessment and evaluation of each repetition to learn how to do a complex task well. Further, they require constant practice because of the natural degradation curve, and recency of experience is also important. The world of aviation has been the place a lot of this learning theory developed, and all of it is written in blood. Missing a serve in tennis or a putt on the golf green is not as critical as missing the runway...*

This is the essence of practice for salespeople. Sales is a knowledge and skill-based profession. Proficiency in skill sets only comes from practice. This practice includes mental rehearsal and role playing with peers. Role playing in sales meetings has been shown to be one of the most effective ways for managers to coach performance. Even though this practice is a proven training method, many sales organizations fail to use role playing because performing in front of peers makes some salespeople nervous. My response to this faulty logic is: So? Why is it a problem that this makes people nervous? If practicing in a non-threatening climate makes them nervous, I can imagine how a real sales call affects them. This is precisely why they need to practice.

For those who feel that they are too experienced to practice, consider professional golfers that work with swing coaches and spend countless hours on practice greens and driving ranges perfecting their technique. Are they less professional because they practice or are they more professional because they do indeed practice?

### **A failure to prepare comes from a failure to care.**

*A tourist approached Arthur Rubenstein on the street and asked, "Pardon me Sir, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?"*

*The renowned pianist replied, "Practice. Practice. Practice."*

SEAL Team Six rehearsed their mission for months. They practiced in the desert and in mock-ups of the building that housed their target. They felt no self-consciousness in front of their peers. These veteran operators welcome the input that they receive because it saves lives.

Mental rehearsal is repeating the wording that you use in your presentation. It is replaying your responses to tough objections. It is visualizing asking for the order. It may be the first time the customer witnesses your presentation, but you do not want it to be the first time you experience it.

## Performance

This is the time to execute your plan, face-to-face with your customer. Now, you perform what you have prepared, planned, and practiced. This is the time to give your full attention to the customer, the plan, and the sales call.

“In basketball—as in life—true joy comes from being fully present in each and every moment, not just when things are going your way. Of course, it’s no accident that things are more likely to go your way when you stop worrying about whether you’re going to win or lose and focus all of your attention on what’s happening *right this moment*.” (*Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* by Phil Jackson)

Professionals surrender their egos to the cause they serve. In a team sport, this means playing for the good of the team. In a military operation, this means focusing on the mission. In an orchestra, it is forgoing individual recognition for the harmony of the orchestra. In sales, this means subordinating your ego to better serve customers. To paraphrase Phil Jackson, it is no secret that if you quit worrying about closing deals and focus on creating value for the customer, you will have more deals.

Put your best foot forward. During performance, expect the best from yourself, and hold yourself to high standards. Accept nothing less than your personal best. The success that you earn with a high level of personal performance tastes sweeter than luck. Failure is never easy, but it is easier to process when you have performed at your peak. You may be disappointed at the outcome of your efforts, but you never want to be disappointed with your performance.

## Post-Performance Review

This is post-call evaluation. How well did you perform? In this review phase you study what you did right and wrong, what worked and what failed. MIT professor of management and best-selling author of *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge, wrote “The Army’s After Action Review (AAR) is arguably one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised. Yet, most every corporate effort to graft this truly innovative practice into their culture has failed because, again and again, people reduce the living practice of AAR’s to a sterile technique.” After-action reviews identify what went right, what went wrong, what they could have done differently, and what they will do differently in the future.

Col. Barry Bruns shared with me the U.S. Air Force’s experience with their version of post-performance reviews:

*In fighters, we found that 30% of the learning, the change in behavior, took place in the mission prep and pre-flight briefing, 20% in the air, and 50%*

*during the post flight debriefing. It was not unusual in an Air-to-Air mission for the debriefing to consume 2 hours covering a 30 minute flight.*

There are educational and motivational components when reviewing your performance. Success is highly motivating. Failure is highly educational.

Legendary baseball player, Ted Williams, was interviewed on an ABC morning show about his .406 season in baseball. When asked what went through his mind that year, he responded, "When I was on a hitting streak, I would lie awake at night for hours trying to figure out why that baseball looked as big as a basketball. I couldn't miss it. My logic was simple. If I didn't know what I was doing right when I was doing it right, how would I know what to do right when I was doing it wrong?" He enjoyed the motivational high of performing at his peak and leveraged this success by analyzing his personal success formula.

Salespeople and their coaches often miss a coaching opportunity when they skip the post-call debriefing. They fail to learn from these questions:

- How did it go?
- How was the chemistry with the buyer?
- How was the quality of my efforts?
- Did I achieve my objectives?
- What is the next step from here?
- What knowledge will I take away from this experience and how will I use it in the future?

Failure is disappointing, and losing hurts. It is a measure of your commitment. How you process failure is important. People that internalize failure take it personally. People that treat failure as feedback learn from it and benefit from it. They feel the disappointment and move on.

"They (winners) understand that failure reflects on the performance, not the performer. Not the person. Never the person. A winner will simply try again and work at being more effective next time. (The Mental Game of Baseball: A Guide to Peak Performance by Henry Dorfman and Karl Kuehl) This is sage advice for salespeople and their managers or those that coach them: Focus on the performance, not the person.

How big a failure is it if people learn the lessons of what succeeds and what fails? A salesperson who fails to learn from experience is

compounding failure at an alarming rate. You will win some and you will lose some. That is the attraction of sales. It is a meritocracy where there are no participation awards. You earn your successes and failures. If you take something from an experience that improves your odds of future success, that experience is not so much a loss as it is part of your ongoing education.

### Summary

Professionals stand out, and that is what makes them outstanding. They stand out because of their expertise and willingness to hold themselves to the highest standards. They view themselves as professionals and conduct their business in that fashion. For professionals, the road to that status is long, marked by their preparation, planning, practice, performance, and post-performance review. Salespeople can raise their level of professionalism by employing this five-step model. To restate the thesis from this paper: If you treat sales as a profession, others will treat you as a professional.

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*

**George Santayana**

## About the Author



Tom Reilly is co-author of *Value-Added Selling*, 4th edition (McGraw-Hill 2018). Additionally, he has written twelve other books including the hot-selling *Crush Price Objections*. His award-winning column appears in *Industrial Distribution Magazine*. Tom has a Master's degree in psychology and is a faculty member at the University of Industrial Distribution. He began his career as a salesman for a Fortune 500 chemical company and then opened his own distribution company in Houston, Texas. He sold that in 1981 to pursue a full-time speaking and sales training career. You may contact him through his website [www.TomReillyTraining.com](http://www.TomReillyTraining.com).

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