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Sender : 48482@bizmailtoday.com**Subject :** [ABD Survival Guide] Lessons From The Four Aces**To :** Thomas A. Lincoln <tlincoln16@comcast.net>**Reply To :** ben@mentorcoach.com**THE ALL-BUT-DISSERTATION SURVIVAL GUIDE™**

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April 25, 2011**A Note from the Editor**

Tracy Steen, Ph.D.

It's time for me to do some mental spring cleaning! I think I'll start by updating my *Things I'll Never Do* list. *Owning a Snake* and *Hunting* will remain untouched at the top of the list; however, I can definitely cross off *Spending a Beautiful Day on the Couch Watching Televised Sports*. That's right: I just spent the day glued to a baseball game, and I'll do it again!

I guess you could say that my access to Phillies tickets and my fast track to fandom came along with my happy marriage. My husband, a longtime Phillies fan, cleverly hooked my attention by emphasizing the psychology of baseball whenever I joined him for a game. Now it's hard to watch a game without pausing to discuss flow, motivation, courage, persistence, attention, resiliency, emotion regulation...the list goes on and on because baseball is a positive psychology goldmine! In

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this special coauthored issue of the ABD Survival Guide, we will share positive psychology insights from baseball relevant to the dissertation process. But first, limber up with some Inspirational Quotes.

Inspirational Quotes

"Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

"It doesn't matter if you try and try and try again, and fail. It does matter if you try and fail, and fail to try again." ~ Charles Kettering

"It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult task which, more than anything else, will affect its successful outcome." ~ William James

"Ability is what you're capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do. Attitude determines how well you do it." ~ Lou Holtz

"Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness." ~ James Thurber

"The most essential factor is persistence--the determination never to allow your energy or enthusiasm to be dampened by the discouragement that must inevitably come." ~ James Whitcomb Riley

"Trouble has no necessary connection with discouragement. Discouragement has a germ of its own, as different from trouble as arthritis is different from a stiff joint." ~ F. Scott Fitzgerald

Lessons From The Four Aces by Tom Lincoln and Tracy Steen

Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, Roy Oswalt, and Cole Hamels are the top starting pitchers of this year's Philadelphia Phillies. Collectively, they are known as "The Four Aces"--and as an ABD you have much in common with them. Like the Four Aces, you will need to cultivate and nurture your abilities to focus under pressure, rebound from adversity, and combat burnout and negativity.

Enough ink has been spilled about whether the Four Aces will or will not be one of the greatest rotations of starting pitchers in the history of baseball. Combined, they have achieved every major success possible for active pitchers in the major leagues, including Halladay's perfect game pitched last season. (No batter reached a base!)

Beyond obvious physical talent and skills, the Four Aces share in common a tremendous mental discipline, and it is this mental discipline that can serve as an inspiration and model for ABDs (even if they are not Phillies

fans). When the Four Aces are "in the zone," they are practically unhittable.

How do The Four Aces find the zone and stay there despite unrelenting stress and unavoidable distractions? In this article we will unpack the mental discipline demonstrated by the Four Aces and highlight applications relevant to ABDs. Recent performances by each of the Aces--Oswalt, Lee, Halladay, and Hamels--provide lessons for ABDs who would like to become PhDs. Let's begin with Roy Oswalt.

Roy Oswalt served up a pitch late last year that illustrates the intensity of focus required by an ace pitcher. Oswalt was just about to start the windup to a pitch when the batter unexpectedly requested a time out and stepped away from the plate. The call for time was not loud enough or soon enough for Oswalt to stop his throw, so he threw his pitch despite the absence of the batter. The pitch was fast and accurate, and it hit the catcher's glove with a resounding thud. Apparently, when Oswalt is in the zone, he does not even see the batter anymore. His entire focus is on where he wants the pitch to land, the final target. The ABD can draw an important lesson from this vignette:

Roy Oswalt



Lesson #1: Finish What You Have Started. Like a baseball season (with 162 games!), the dissertation process is an endurance event. In order to make it to the final defense, ABDs must commit over and over again to their daily work sessions. Fatigue, unexpected challenges, and distractions are inevitable. ABDs who become PhDs are able to maintain their commitment to finishing *no matter what*. Next time you are tempted to skip a scheduled work session or quit altogether, draw some inspiration from Oswalt. **Focus on your target and finish what you started.**

Maintaining unwavering focus is particularly difficult for starting pitchers--even in modern baseball where relief pitchers are used earlier and earlier in games. Realistically, a starting pitcher should throw 6 or 7 innings of quality baseball, around 100 pitches, giving up only a few hits and a few runs along the way before he is relieved by someone with a fresher arm. (It usually takes days for the starting pitcher's arm to recover.) To fulfill his role, the starting pitcher needs to have the mental toughness to keep pitching even when his arm and spirits flag--and even after a batter clobbers an inaccurate pitch for a home run.

Cliff Lee



Cliff Lee's method of developing that stamina is as much mental as physical. He frequently remarks on his efforts to steer his thoughts away from anything that might distract him when he is playing. Those efforts pay off. Recently he pitched a 12-strike-out, complete-game shutout, and it was beautiful to watch Lee's process. His pitches flowed rhythmically, one after the next in rapid succession. Batters appeared frustrated and rattled, but Lee's rhythmic flow remained steady.

Lesson #2: Find Your Rhythm. If you are lucky, you have experienced flow while researching or writing. Flow, a concept made popular by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is a state of complete absorption in a challenging task. When we are in flow, we lose our sense of time and self awareness. Writers in flow work as fearlessly and effortlessly as Cliff Lee appeared on the mound.

If you could use a refresher course on how to make writing a flow activity, please see my article on the subject in the ABD Survival Guide archives or read Csikszentmihalyi's original work on the subject.

It is important to note that finding flow requires a larger rhythm of practice and mental discipline that extends beyond any particular writing session. Flow is characterized by an absence of distracting thoughts and self monitoring, so the conditions that allow flow to happen develop gradually overtime with practice and consistency. The roots of Cliff Lee's shutout victory can be traced to thousands of hours of preparation.

Similarly, ABDs are more likely to find flow in individual writing sessions when they find a rhythm of daily work. Flow and stamina are the reward for ABDs who develop and stick with a regular writing routine.

Even if you are already following the suggestions presented thus far in the newsletter to develop a regular rhythm of daily work, you will still encounter your fair share of unproductive days. Through good planning you can create an inviting work space free of external distractions, but even soundproof walls are no match for your biggest potential saboteur: your own thoughts.

Another key to the success of productive ABDs and The Four Aces is the ability to avoid dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This is why Roy Halladay is revered. Of the Four Aces, he is the most capable of concentrating on the present moment. Halladay has a big smile, but he rarely flashes it during a game (even when he is off the pitching mound). Instead, he is all business. When Halladay accepts a hand signal from the Phillies' Carlos Ruiz (one of baseball's best catchers) suggesting to him what to throw for the next pitch, he has a stare that does not seem human. It is a thousand-yard stare, like Yul Brynner's as a robot cowboy in *Westworld*. If, when Halladay is in the zone, he allows his attention to drift to the crowd or the pressures of the game, it is certainly not apparent. His entire focus appears to be on the pitch at hand, and that unrelenting commitment to the present is the third lesson for the ABD.



Lesson #3: Keep Your Attention In The Present Moment. The ability to concentrate solely on the present pitch helps Halladay avoid mental mistakes. ABDs know how quickly a lapse in concentration can result in error. For a pitcher, such a mental mistake might mean that a pitch intended to be thrown with a tricky spin instead crosses the middle of the plate, ripe for the batter to hit it. For the ABD, the mental mistake could be anything from misspelling a word to failing to save a document before a computer crash. It is our responsibility to make sure that we are not demoralized by these mistakes. Although we should learn from them and make corrections, we should not allow thoughts of past mistakes or fears about future ones to become obstacles to performing the task at hand.



Keeping past mistakes from distracting us from the present is no easy task, so it is appropriate that the last baseball lesson for the ABD is resilience in the face of negativity. Cole Hamels is a prime example of the importance of this trait. The youngest of the Four Aces, Hamels was the World Series MVP in 2008. He was confident, even cocky--his nickname is "Hollywood." In 2009, however, he struggled to pitch well in later innings. The average number of runs scored against him (his ERA--earned run average) was the highest of his major league career. Unforgiving Phillies fans greeted him with jeers when he left the field. Their contempt intensified after Hamels remarked to the press that he was looking forward to the end of the season.

In 2010 Hamels bounced back. Although some of his success could be attributed to changing the mechanics of his pitching--adding a trick or two to his arsenal--he also changed his mental game. That season, the Phillies frequently failed to score runs when he was pitching, and his record of wins and losses was not radically different from the year before. Yet he maintained a positive attitude. And his ERA was his best ever. Hamels' return to Ace status provides an important lesson for the ABD.

Lesson #4: Be A Comeback Kid. It is too soon to tell whether Hamels' statistics this year will be as good as the last, but his career as a whole demonstrates that with the right attitude, comebacks are possible. Like

Hamels, ABDs are vulnerable to criticism, rejection, and lack of support. It takes concentrated mental effort to maintain confidence and courage in the face of negativity, and that's why many ABDs remain ABDs.

Hamels did not quit. Instead, he arrested his decline, not just by improving his physical skills but by improving his mental ones. He appears to have taken the advice of the old song: "Accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative." The dissertation is an endurance event, and you will have many opportunities to increase your mental discipline. When adversity strikes, you can seize the opportunity to make your dramatic comeback.

We hope you enjoyed these lessons from the Four Aces! For handy reference, here's a brief recap:

1. Finish what you started.
2. Find your rhythm.
3. Keep your attention in the present moment.
4. Be a Comeback Kid.

Here's to an exciting season!

Tom Lincoln



Tom Lincoln is an artist based in Philadelphia. He is a graduate of Swarthmore College and New York University School of Law. His current work is on display at [studio:christensen](#)

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Tracy Steen, Ph.D. , is a clinical psychologist and dissertation coach in Philadelphia, PA. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Steen draws on her research background in positive psychology in her coaching work with writers, helping them to remove internal obstacles so they can find more engagement and flow in

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Nancy Whichard, Ph.D., PCC, is a dissertation and academic career coach. She has successfully coached to completion doctoral candidates from all over the world. To recommit to your writing and replace self-sabotage with a robust writing habit, contact Nancy about Dissertation Boot Camp and about coaching at nancy@nancywhichard.com. To write sooner rather than later, enroll in Boot Camp. To receive Nancy's Smart Tips for Writers e-newsletter, sign up at www.nancywhichard.com and read her blog at www.successfulwritingtips.com.

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BEN DEAN, Publisher, ABDSG

Ben holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. He began writing the ABDSG in 1997. Over the years, the ABDSG has provided thousands of hours of pro bono coaching and teleworkshops to ABDs all over the world. Ben is also the founder of MentorCoach (www.MentorCoach.com), a virtual university focused on training accomplished helping professionals to become part-time or full-time coaches. You might wish to subscribe to the free eMentorCoach News. Finally you may also wish to subscribe to the Coaching Toward Happiness eNewsletter! It's on applying the science of Positive Psychology to your work and life (131,000 readers). Ben lives in suburban Maryland with his wife, Janice, their two children, and Dusty, their Norwegian dwarf bunny. They all love coaching from the beach!

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