



*Mike Gillette*



# 5 WAYS TO BECOME TOUGH AS NAILS



By Mike Gillette

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The Mike Gillette Interview by Coach Chris Wilson





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**CHRIS:** Welcome aboard. This is Coach Chris with Critical Bench and on the line with me today is none other than Mike Gillette. Mike has a very, very unique background in all things manly and I'm being a little silly, but Mike is kind of the ultimate guy. He's a man's man. He's seen and done a lot in his life and he is probably the one person on the planet that can do the best job of talking about a topic that's very, very important to, I think, most guys; and that would be talking about toughness, what that entails. If you ask five different people to define toughness you'd probably get five different answers. And so that's why I have Mike on the line with me today. Mike, hello.

**MIKE:** Hey, Chris.

**CHRIS:** I think I just want to kind of just start from scratch and since we got you, let's just hammer home what is toughness to you? How does Mike Gillette define the term toughness?





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**MIKE:** Okay, Chris. I think that is actually an excellent place to start because I think there are, as you said, different people look at it differently and different people look at it, dare I say, incorrectly. I think toughness sometimes gets confused with the attitudes, attitudes that are sort of aggressive and often times that's masquerading something hidden underneath. I look at it a little differently.

One of the other things that people look at toughness or describe toughness as something that is physical. You know, he's a tough guy because he's big and strong. He's a tough guy, he's physically resilient. That's partially correct but I think that you can't talk about toughness without describing it as mental toughness because the mind navigates the body. Any decision you make, any behavior you exhibit starts initially as a thought. So while a person can manifest great physical toughness, that is merely an extension of decisions and choices that have occurred in the intellectual realm. So I refer to toughness primarily as mental toughness. Those terms for me are in essence synonymous.



The key to mental toughness, Chris, is applying consistently particular traits. Traits that I describe toughness as consisting of are things like motivation, positive attitude, emotional control, calmness under duress and something I call action readiness.

Now, consistency is of course important. You have to consistently apply those traits day in, day out. If you do that you can achieve things that regular people, non-tough people, cannot. And it doesn't really matter. Even though we equate toughness with doing physical things or with people who seem to be innately physical, toughness, discipline if you like that term, is much more universal than





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that. So whether you are playing a sport, learning a musical instrument or you aspire to write a screen play, mental toughness will enable you to succeed in any of those and a wide variety of other endeavors as well.

So let's look at some of those attributes. The first of which that I mentioned was motivation. While many sports are team activities and other pursuits are often done in cooperation with others, life is more or less an individual sport. Motivation comes from within. You know, people use that phrase self-motivation. To me, that's redundant. All motivation is self-motivation. It doesn't come from anything else. The intensity of your motivation is determined by how badly you want something or how badly you want to perform well.

Motivation can be strengthened in different ways. For some of us, if we think back to a negative experience, a failure, that feeling often times can provide the motivation for you to keep going, to keep practicing, to keep learning. Whereas, a time of victory or success can also provide motivation in that it fuels the desire to recreate that feeling, to reclaim that winning experience.

Other people use time as a motivator, meaning that if you think about others, perhaps in a competitive context, while they're relaxing you can be using time as an asset. Time can be on your side and that's when you're working to become more competitive with others because you're increasing your own skills. So that's motivation.

Positive attitude is really the outlook that you try to hang onto. We have to understand you can't do everything well. Nobody can, not even the most gifted among us. But that's all right. That's everybody. We all have gifts; we all have areas that need work.

But if we look at those things that we're good at and we direct our attention on



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that, we can start to analyze those things. What is it that makes you, if you're well-coordinated, if you're athletic, what are some of the things that make you good at your particular game, your particular sport?

Maybe you do well academically because you seem to be comfortable with the process of studying. Well, break that down. What are the things that are taking place there? What are the steps? How can you apply those same attributes in other areas of your life?

By focusing on strengths you can gain confidence and you can gain inspiration from those things. And that's a hard thing to do because we tend to, as humans, focus on the things that we don't do well.

One exercise that I will have athletes do, like if they're in a camp environment, is I have them raise their hand. Tell me three things that happened today that you're not happy about. And boom, boom, boom. They rattle them right off.

Okay, now tell me three things that happened today that you're proud of, that you're happy about. Long pause. So I will give them homework and I will say from now through the rest of the camp, through the practice season, I want you to write down three things every day that you're happy about, things that you did well, things that you want to recreate during the next practice.





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We need to practice focusing on strength because that typically does not come naturally to us. Ultimately we are in charge of creating our own positive attitude and that's an important attitude to cultivate.

When I refer to emotional control, some people get confused by that. They think that, oh, he's talking about tough guys. Tough guys don't show emotion. Tough guys suppress their emotion. And that's not the case at all.

Controlling your emotions, you're managing your emotions or your mood, is simply preventing yourself from falling apart when things don't go well. But people who are not in control of their emotions tend to get upset when things don't go as expected. They can alienate coworkers or teammates by over-emotional behavior. They can embarrass themselves; they can embarrass people close to them.

Mentally tough people have a tough exterior. They don't let external circumstances affect them visibly. Now, we all feel what we feel, but we need to get into the habit of taking care of business regardless of what just happened, particularly if it was something unexpected, particularly if it was something that was not consistent with our goals, something that we see as a negative development.

There are always times in life when things happen that are beyond our sphere of control. The mentally tough person keeps their emotions in check and stays on with the plan. They don't get thrown-off; they don't get distracted. They persevere; they keep going. That's really the essence of emotional control.

Now, when I refer to calmness under duress, that's a little more intense. Yes, we're talking about emotional control, but we're kind of taking things up. Now we're talking about circumstances that create real stress, real pressure. Anything that we pursue, if it's worthwhile, is going to have some connotation of high pressure





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at one point or another. Mentally tough people tend to exhibit what makes them special most often during those times.

Calmness under duress isn't something that you can just switch on. It has to be cultivated. It's just like physical training, physical development. We need to seek-out situations that provide a certain amount of stress, a certain amount of pressure and we treat it like progression. You work from lower pressure circumstances to medium pressure circumstances to higher pressure situations. You put yourself in front of larger and larger groups. You seek-out better opponents or more challenging scenarios in which you do whatever it is that you do.



Ideally if we progress in this manner, if we deliberately seek-out opportunities when we're not going to be at our best, eventually we can be at our best in those circumstances. And what seems like high pressure before simply becomes the new normal.

The term that I use, action readiness, is preparatory. It's attitudinal. Mentally tough people get themselves amped-up and ready to go to battle. Sometimes that battle is metaphorical; sometimes it's a real battle. It could be a performance or a game or whatever it might be. It might take place at a time that is inconvenient or when you are not at your best. Perhaps you're under the weather; you're tired, what have you. But there's a satisfaction that comes from



doing your best in less than optimal circumstances. It makes it easier to succeed in all circumstances.

Even if your performance at a given moment is not your best ever, it should always be the best that you can possibly give so that the next time when conditions are more favorable you'll perform better because of all of the previous times that you had pushed yourself to give it your all.

**CHRIS:** Wow. That's a lot there. And I love it.

**MIKE:** Just that easy, Chris.

**CHRIS:** And it's just that easy. Wow. Okay. Well, I've taken some notes here and I'll read them about 100 times.

Okay. Everything you hit on is just – it's a lot of powerful stuff there that you've said. If you could condense that into five action steps, five ways for people to become tough as nails, how would you go about doing that?

**MIKE:** Excellent. What I would say is that we start small and expand out.

**CHRIS:** Okay.

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**MIKE:** We start very much on the internal and then project all of those intentions outward from there.

So the first step, Chris, is to **Be Yourself** and that's an **Integrity** issue. Personal integrity is foundational to toughness. Another way to say that is you need to live your truth.



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If you think about every person who you've met in real life or has been written about or even fictional characters, every person who ever had the reputation of being a tough guy or a tough girl has first and foremost been an individual. They have been their own person. There is nothing tougher than someone who has the integrity to always be true to themselves, step one.

**CHRIS:** Wow.

**MIKE:** Now step two – first you need to be yourself, step one. Step two, you need to **Upgrade Yourself**. That's what I call the **Accountability** piece. It's hard for some people. You need to assess yourself. You have to be objective. And this isn't something that we do once and we forget it. We do it all the time. If something needs fixing, you fix it. If there's something about you that should be better, make it so. Set goals, plan well and execute. Upgrade yourself.

Now from there, we get into daily habits or conduct, what I refer to as you need to **Manage Yourself**. This is really where we exhibit our **Mental Toughness**. You need to be someone that people can rely on. You need to be someone that you can rely on, which means that you don't quit, you don't complain, you don't freak-out; you handle your business.



The next step, step four, Chris, is **Forge Yourself**. This is the **Physical Toughness** piece. You'll notice that mental toughness came first because it always comes first.





**CHRIS:** Absolutely.

**MIKE:** Mental toughness precedes everything else.

**CHRIS:** Yep.

**MIKE:** So when I say forge yourself I'm talking about the physical self. Your body is a reflection of your whole self. It makes a statement. What do you want it to say or what do you want to find out about yourself? You need to push yourself until you become better.

Now, for some people that becomes kind of a visual pursuit and that's okay because your body changes visually when you adopt more productive habits, more positive habits, when you manage some of your daily behaviors and people use that as a barometer, their physical appearance as a barometer of their physical toughness, of their self-discipline. If that's what they're doing, that's great.

But I know a lot of people who push themselves very hard physically that don't necessarily cultivate an external appearance that the average person aspires to. There are Strongman competitors, there are powerlifters out there that are not pretty but they are forging their bodies to be good at a particular activity.

That goes back to being yourself. Live your truth. Don't worry about what other people define success as in any sphere. You have to be true to yourself. So if being true to yourself is building the kind of body that carries big stones around and throws kegs through the air, then be that person. If being true to yourself and being physically tough means running an Ironman, don't listen to the people who say that's not a good idea. Do it. Push yourself and make yourself better that way.

Your physical development is a reflection of your individuality and it should reflect



your priorities and no one else's. That's what I mean when I say push yourself until you become better.

**CHRIS:** Yeah, and success with that action step is very much an individual thing. You could have five very, very different people who all display physical toughness and they look extremely different.

**MIKE:** Absolutely. Think about the concert pianist. The physical discipline it takes to put in hours and hours every day may not be so apparent to people who are extremely physical, but it is a physical act and it takes mental toughness and physical toughness to be that person. So there are a lot of ways to define mental toughness, physical toughness and as long as you define it a particular way and you're true to that definition, you're winning.

**CHRIS:** Right.

**MIKE:** And then the last one, and this is really more of a philosophical step for me, because for me mental toughness, being physically strong, trying to improve yourself intellectually, all of those things go hand-in-hand. I don't like to do things in a one-dimensional way. I don't want to be that person. I like to hang around with people who push me and make me better in a variety of realms. You do that by engaging with the world around you, the people around you.

So we've had four steps up to this point. Be yourself; upgrade yourself; manage yourself; forge yourself and the last one, really the most important one, is **Share Yourself**.

**You will never be as strong as when you're being strong for someone else.**

We'll put it in the military context. Every Medal of Honor recipient was acting on



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the behalf of someone else. Serving, helping or caring for others offers us the greatest opportunities to demonstrate toughness, to demonstrate strength in all of its forms. Share yourself.

**CHRIS:** Absolutely.

**MIKE:** So the thing about mental toughness, if we can sum-up everything that we've talked about thus far, is that it is not innate. You are not born with it or not, it's not like you have the genes to be tall, you just have to learn it. It is a learned skill, and more than learned, it's a choice. I always refer to toughness as a lifestyle choice. You decide upon it; you choose it and then you have to keep choosing it.



Your mental toughness comes from the decision to consistently apply the traits that we've been discussing. You can start today and you can reach levels of achievement in your sport, your hobby, your vocation, and your relationships, that you may not have thought possible. Outstanding athletic power, superior intellect, musical talent, will take people to a particular place. But without mental toughness that person will never attain their ultimate potential.

**CHRIS:** Wow. I'm impressed by the fact that you're able to take all of that initial information and really condense it into something that – just really a nice checklist, a nice action step list for people to dedicate themselves to. I think that's just tremendous.

I couldn't agree more with everything that you've said and I'm kind of going





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through, rating myself as you're going through these action steps. I'm like, okay, I'm a little weak on that one. I need some work there. I'm good on that one. You know, so it's fantastic.

Someone can use this and apply it instantly to their life and I think that's tremendous. It's rare that you can come across something and in just a matter of a few moments you can really begin to create kind of that checklist to become a better human being. And in reality, that's what you've just described. Five ways to become tough as nails is really five ways to become just a better person, a well-rounded human being and achieve successes that maybe you never thought possible. So I think that's awesome.

**MIKE:** In its ideal form, I completely agree with you, Chris, because if we think about, again, if we go back to people who we've known or read about, people that we consider tough, they typically had levels of achievement beyond just, hey, they were tough. The toughness was the key that drove all of the other successes. And if we have that toughness it should allow us to experience success and satisfaction in all of the realms that we were just talking about. That's what we want.

**CHRIS:** Yep.

**MIKE:** Because otherwise toughness is not that big a deal. If all it was, was just about making you physically resilient, I mean, that's nice, but that's just such a small part of the overall picture of who we are and who we can be.

**CHRIS:** Exactly. Yeah. Consistency and persistence with these five things is really what it comes down to.

**MIKE:** Absolutely.



**CHRIS:** You'll find that. And in any reading I've ever done about just people who have really shaped history, they were all very consistent in their beliefs, in their actions and in their words and everything, and they were persistent. They have that never quit, never stop kind of attitude. That's fantastic.

Well, I thank you so much for sharing that information. As I stated at the beginning, there really is nobody else I feel that can deliver this message better than you, better than Mike Gillette can do it and thank you for your time and I hope everyone listening got as much out of this as I did. I appreciate it, Mike. Thank you so much.

**MIKE:** My pleasure, Chris.



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## A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM MIKE GILLETTE

*I live an unusual life. It's been an amazing life. I've dreamt big, worked hard and done my best to make strong decisions. Decisions that have helped me get to those dreams. But the truth is I never expected to have this life. This is my story.*

*I had a tough childhood. I was the result of an unintended pregnancy and my parents split-up when I was three. My mother was left with me, no money and a lot of anger. She pursued bad relationships with bad men. Men who would abuse her.*

*Eventually she settled on one relationship. A relationship which would suck the life from her. And from me.*

*Growing up, I saw my mother get punched, kicked and choked. One night she was thrown down a flight of stairs. Sometimes we would leave. But we always went back. I was often left alone. Some days there was no food in the house. I remember being eight or nine years old and putting myself to bed. Or boiling beef bouillon cubes for my dinner.*

*But the one thing we never seemed to lack was alcohol. It was everywhere. If you've ever watched that TV show Cops you'll notice that wherever the cops go, inside every house they respond to looks the same: chaos. That was how we*







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*lived. As I grew older the violence got worse. One night, after having her head beaten against the living room wall, my mother went to the doctor. A brain tumor was discovered. After a year of treatment, she died. I was fifteen.*

*My life became a mess. I descended into drugs and alcohol. As much and as often as I could. In February 1981, at the age of 18, I decided I'd had enough. I checked into a motel, consumed a ridiculous amount of booze and pain killers and lay down on the bed waiting to die. Much to my surprise, I woke up the next day, very much alive. Which led me to conclude two things.*

- 1. I must be hard to kill*
- 2. Since I was still alive, then maybe there was a reason that I had been given a second chance.*

*A few months later I reconnected with a girl I dated in high school a couple years earlier. Although we had nothing in common, I had always been drawn to her. She was a good person, the kind of person I would have liked to have been. We began doing things together. One of those things was going to church. Later that year - the same year my life almost ended - was also the year that my life really began, as a follower of Jesus Christ.*

*Now, I'm not here to discuss religion; I'm just telling my story. And it would be dishonest if I were to leave out what I consider to be the most important part of that story.*

*So what happened next?*

*I wanted to live as differently as I possibly could from who I used to be. I wanted to help people. I was too young to become a cop and college was too expensive,*



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so I joined the Army.

*Things clicked. The harder I worked, the more I was rewarded. The Army was the first place I'd ever experienced this dynamic and it was the place where I started to dream big. Through my service, I became eligible for an ROTC scholarship, allowing me to pursue my military career as an officer. In 1984, I started college at the University of Arizona.*



*On the last day of my first semester, I went on a climbing trip with some friends. A day which started pleasantly enough.*

*We were to rappel from a railway bridge into a canyon and climb back out. The leader of the group had loaned me some rappelling gear that I had not used before so I had to rely on him to set it up for me.*

*As soon as I stepped off the bridge I immediately knew something was wrong. The equipment had not engaged and I was rocketing towards the canyon floor. The only thing I could do to avoid certain death was to wrap myself around my rope. I wrapped every limb around that rope... and experienced the worst pain I'd ever felt as it burned through my gloves, trousers, shirt... and skin.*

*It was the most intense pain I've ever experienced... that is, until I slammed into the canyon floor, breaking my back and ankles.*

*Later that day in the emergency room my orthopedic surgeon told me the 'good' news: I would walk again... but I would never run or jump out of airplanes any more. I had, in one day, lost the life I'd wanted and worked so hard for.*



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*I spent the next four and a half years working to reclaim my physical self. With more setbacks than successes, it was a dark and painful period.*

*What was hard for me to keep in perspective during those years of pain and frustration was that I should not have survived that fall. I had actually been given a second chance. For a second time.*

*So how does this story turn out?*

*Well, hard work got me back to where I wanted to be physically. And once that happened I was able to go back to dreaming big.*

*Over the years I've continued to work hard and my dreams have gotten bigger. Even today, I'm accomplishing goals that just a few years ago, would have seemed impossible to me.*

*I went from a scared person to this person.*

*I went from a weak person to the person I am now.*

*I've been given the strength to live an amazing life, to do amazing things, things that people who knew me way back when would never believe.*







How did Mike Gillette overcome catastrophe after catastrophe and still pull himself together to become one of the world's most deadly renowned tactical trainers?

Most people would have been crushed by those experiences, but not Mike. What was his 'secret' to bouncing back from adversity?

WHAT GAVE MIKE THE POWER TO LEAD HIS AMAZING LIFE WAS HIS [MENTAL TOUGHNESS](#).

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