



Episode 1,316: How to Be Better at (Almost) Everything

Guest: Pat Flynn

WOODS: I love a title like *How to Be Better at (Almost) Everything*. Very, very good. And of course, the content is great. It's not fluff. So many of these types of books — it's just maddening. I want to say quick thing. You do have in there some advice about going to sleep, waking up, morning routine, stuff like that. And I had Hal Elrod on the show a long time ago, and he wrote a book called *The Miracle Morning*.

FLYNN: Yeah.

WOODS: And he's had great success with that, and so many people have reported great success with that. The problem that I have, I mean, I get up earlier than I used to, but I don't get up at like 4:30 or something. I'm not a farmer. So I guess my question is: going to bed — I mean, you're a young guy. Do you mind if I ask how old you are?

FLYNN: Yeah, I'm 29, Tom.

WOODS: You're 29. Okay, so you're not even 30, and you're telling me I should go to bed before 10? What am I, 87? *Hey, keep it down out there, sonny*. I'm not I'm not going to be that guy.

FLYNN: [laughing] Yeah, it's hard, isn't it? It's a compromise. And if there's anything that I want to get across in the book, as I'm sure is obvious to you and pretty much all of your listeners, is that all success comes down to managing compromise. And even though I'm not that old, I've always had very poor sleep habits, just ingrained into my family. So I've often had to go to certain measures that might not be necessary for other people to ensure quality sleep. And one of those, and not just for me, but I've found for most people, is just getting to bed at a reasonable hour. It not only ensures that you do get enough sleep, but also all the types of mindless stuff that people do before bed, scrolling through social media, watching any kinds of TV that gets them all wound up and excited. Even if they then go right to bed, they're just not going to be getting the quality of sleep that they should be. And I mean, sleep is essential for performance in everything: intellectual, physical, you name it. So if there's just like one small tweak or one small sacrifice that's worth making, putting a little bit more attention on the quality of your sleep is a big one.

WOODS: All right, I realize that's an oddball thing to start with, but that was the thing that just stuck in my craw when I read this. I mean, come on. *I mean, geez, you're sucking all the life out of my life already, and I'm not even 30*, seems to be the message. But look, I know, I know. Look, if I were being mature and serious, I would see the merits of what you're saying.

That's just a hard — and you know, our friend Michael Malice, he's a very go-to-bed-late guy, so I can text him at 2am and get a response. And so that means that when we record my show, I never schedule it for before 11, because unless he's got a media hit, he's going to be sleeping. So I've come to think maybe I was right the first time. As long as you get enough sleep, you're probably okay. But anyway, there's no point in debating this. This is just a small thing.

FLYNN: No, no, it's good. And Michael is obviously a very interesting character for many reasons, and I work with him on his fitness routine. But yeah, you're right, he does have a good sleep schedule; it's just off the usual hours for most people.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah. And the thing is, my kids and I are the same way. Like over their Christmas break, there was nothing we wanted to do more than just stay up. We'll watch something, we'll play a game, we'll do whatever. We do not want to go to bed. I mean, I'm just as much a kid as they are. I don't want to go to bed. I won't do it.

All right, let's talk about the more general themes of the book, because there's something in here that's quite surprising, at least it was — I get the merits of it, but I could see how it would be quite surprising to most people. And I was surprised it was in here. In terms of a strategy for getting better at things and for just being more effective overall, it's not hyper specialization, which we're encouraged to believe. And of course, there's a sense in which, since we're in the division of labor, everybody specializes. Obviously, to some degree, you specialize. But there's this sense of, in a lot of fields, that hyper specialization is the way to go, that your aim should be to become the world's best whatever. Like in academia, the most knowledgeable person about the year 1925 or the most knowledgeable person about labor history in the 1890s, or whatever it is, and you just focus on that. And then if anybody asked you, Well, what were the economic effects of the bimetallism movement on the labor — you would have no idea what to say, because all you know is labor history. And that kind of gets at what the problem with that is. So what's wrong with thinking like that?

FLYNN: Well, there's a deep truth in what you say, and economics is a good example. So it's one of the reasons that we should never agree with the statement that, "Well, all economists say," because the truth is, most economists are hyperspecialized in just the way that you've described. So it makes no sense to say that all economists agree with something, because most of them may never even have thought about seriously what that something actually is. But even backing up from that, the thrust of the book or the main thesis that I'm trying to make is that, in today's world, in today's economy or as a human being in general, you're really better off getting good to great at a lot of different things, or at least fairly competent and then learning to stack and combine skills to form competitive and creative advantages that way, rather than trying to hardcore specialize and just be the best in the world at any one thing. And then we can branch that off and see examples of where that might be useful, either in a specific field like economics, being more of a generalist so you can see what's wrong with people who are hyper specialists like Krugman making often uninformed extrapolations, or as an entrepreneur. And that's really where the book is leaning for most people, is that if you're trying to bring something valuable into the world, if you're trying to get attention and profit and build a business, you're going to be better off focusing at least as much on breadth of skill as you are depth.

WOODS: Yeah, that's the key thing. And it's interesting that one of the things you say in there is that, in terms of your own personal happiness, it's also worth thinking about stacking skills,

rather than trying to be hyper focused on just one, because when you're hyper focused on just one, your focus tends to be on trying to be the very, very best or one of the top 10 in the world or whatever. And that not only is that extremely difficult and highly unlikely, but it means, because you're just constantly going to be working toward it and working toward it and working toward it and finding it to be ever more difficult, you're going to always have — I mean, yearning is fine, but when it's just constant frustration and a goal that is virtually impossible to reach, you wonder if that's the tone you want to set for your life, rather than saying, *Hey, I've reached a level of proficiency at this particular task that's more than almost anyone, let's say most people who put their hand to it, and now I think I'd like to go give something else a try.* And you can be much more at peace with yourself.

FLYNN: Well, Tom, I think that's exactly right, and probably because I wrote something very much similar to that [laughing]. But yeah, I mean, so much of the way specialization — now, look, don't get me wrong. Specialization as a tool is great. But this hyper specialization approach leads to what you just described, is people often park their identity or their happiness or their self-worth or whatever you want to call it into being the best at something or better than person X, Y, or Z. And the more you push that — and this is the trap that I fell into many times in my life. First when I was young, I wanted to be the best guitarist. And then once I realized that probably wasn't going to happen, even though I was practicing some eight hours a day to do it, I then wanted to be the best writer or the most profitable business owner. And all of those were really a trap. Now, I learned many special skills and developed a lot of various attributes by focusing in and improving at these things. But whatever happiness was, it wasn't found in any specific level of competency on the guitar. Or I do a lot of work in fitness. It's certainly not found in a level of body fat percentage or muscle mass. It's not linked to a number in the bank account. So while this book is trying to drive a number of points for how entrepreneurs can be successful, I also try and take a page from Aristotle and say, you know, like, let's zoom out — who was a great generalist, as all the old philosophers were. They were all generalists. They tried to know as much as they could about as many different things. That life is really more about knowing and doing and creating good things. And there's many things that we can know, do, and create, so we shouldn't necessarily limit ourselves to just one. And when we happen to do that, especially if it's not the right things, it can often lead to the opposite of what we're pursuing.

WOODS: In my own life, I have never, ever been tempted by hyper specialization, even though that's what academia really demands these days. In history, for example, obviously I had to write a PhD dissertation, but I never thought, *Oh, I want to be a labor historian of the 1920s*, or something. That would have just made me miserable. I wouldn't have been able to stand it. I like the fact that — and plus, maybe it could also be I just don't have the attention span for it. I like to be able to do different things on different days or weeks or months. And then occasionally, though, somebody comes along and takes the wind out of your sails with this whole approach, somebody like a David Gordon, because David Gordon is a generalist, but he knows more history than the historians, more economics than the economists, and more philosophy than the philosophers. And you think, *All right, you jerk, I just got done convincing myself this couldn't be done, and there you are doing it.* But all right, once in a while, you're going to run into a fluke like that.

But how does this translate into how you conduct your professional life or how you decide on or successfully navigate an entrepreneurial venture? How does this particular thing about stacking skills and being a very competent generalist, how does that help you?

FLYNN: Yeah, so a few points on that. And it's certainly worth noting that there are the freak generalists out there. And that's part of the reason that I wanted to go with the term generalist and not Renaissance man or woman or person or what have you, because sometimes people will think of a da Vinci, and I think that sets the bar way too high. That's probably not going to be the case for most of us, nor does it have to be. Tom, maybe we can even use you for a type of case study here, because I think you're a great example. You're obviously a very, extremely well learned historian, but you have a variety of other skills that are enormously useful, that have allowed you to have the influence and the impact that you have, as a generalist. A great speaker, great writer; you know how to design email follow-up and sales campaigns; you understand rhetoric, logic, persuasion. And it's the combination and the stacking of all of these skills that has built the Tom Woods platform.

Now, what I do is in a different space, but it's the same thing. I'm mostly in fitness. I do writing in other fields as well. But I'm not the biggest. I'm not the strongest. I'm not the fastest. I can do a lot of cool, impressive things in a gym, but I haven't won any gold medals, at least that I'm aware of. But I can write. I can explain things in an entertaining and accessible way. I can be enticing. I understand persuasion and how to attract people to my brand, how to develop a unique message for my brand. I've studied the great copywriters, the great marketers. I've learned the tricks of that trade. I'm not a terrible speaker. I'm not great at it, which goes to show that you don't have to even be super at something to get what you need out of it. And so people have asked me who follow me, they'll be like, *Hey, look, you seem to be doing quite well in the fitness industry, but you haven't won any gold medals, so what's the deal?* And I take that graciously, because it just reaffirms my thesis as that's absolutely correct. But I can do other things even just a little bit better than other people have no idea about, and that's the point that I'm ultimately trying to drive. And I think you're a good example of it.

WOODS: Well, look, when you're right, you're right. I'm just kidding you. I appreciate it; it's very kind of you to say those things. What mistakes then do you think people generally are making? It's not just — I realize that obviously the flip side of everything we're saying would be mistakes, but what do you see as the factors that hold people back from, let's say, getting better at things, in including their lives overall? Is their best advice that people have internalized?

FLYNN: Yeah, so I think the easiest way to get at this is with a few examples. I think the economics one or hyper specialization in academia is certainly one example, where people try to learn so much about one particular thing that they almost know everything about nothing. So that's one thing to be cautious of. But going back in my experience, when I was growing up, like I said, I wanted to be the best guitarist. So I tried to mimic a lot of the virtuoso guitar players, people who are just extremely pyrotechnic on the fretboard. But then I would do battle the bands and various shows and stuff like that, and people would kind of ooh and ahh, and they were impressed by my playing. But the people who got the most attention, the people who won the battle of the bands were people who were to be, I think, completely fair, not quite as good at the guitar as I was, but they were decent enough at the guitar, but they could also sing, they could dance, they were good performers, and so on and so forth. So I thought that I could get all the things that I really wanted, which was recognition as a musician or a performer, by just trying to be the best guitarist. And it's often difficult to even measure what the best is. But for me, I had it in my mind of just somehow being like the fastest, most technical player. Turns out that that was only maybe interesting to a very small sliver of specialists themselves. Most people most of the time aren't even interested in the

hardcore specialization. They're attracted to the generalists, the people who can do things well, because once you start to specialize too much, you've lost the vast majority of people most of the time anyways. So I think between those two examples of how people can keep going deeper and deeper and deeper into one area that it almost vanishes, but also in terms of technical performance or competency as well, there's a cutoff point. And I don't know exactly where it is. In the book, I kind of say maybe around like 80% proficiency at things, where like, once you get there, you've got enough of whatever that thing is; it's time to focus on something else.

WOODS: I would like to add, by the way, that I think your table of contents alone, just looking at that, I knew you were a good writer. I had not read you before. I mean, we've talked because I was on your show, but I had not read you before. Just looking at the table of contents, I could tell you were good writer.

FLYNN: Well, thanks. That I was inspired by *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, where the table of contents is really just a sales letter. It's like, how can I not turn to that chapter? So I tried to mimic something of that. I'm glad you enjoyed it.

WOODS: Yeah, it works. It absolutely works. So I mean, the last four chapters: "How to Practice Better and Improve Faster," then "Where to Begin: Meta Skills," but then I like, "Skills You May Be Interested In But May Not Need," and then, "Skills You May Need But May Not Be Interested In." I mean, how do you not turn to those chapters? It's just exceptionally well done. Let me ask you about meta skills, because you devote a chapter to that. What are we talking about in that chapter?

FLYNN: Yeah, these are the foundational skills, skills that every person should have at least a decent command of, but unfortunately, a lot of people don't. So I'll give just one or two examples here. Logic would be the first one, and like how important that is, just learning to think well, to be able to reason in straight channels, is what's going to help you weed out the vast majority of information in life that just you don't need, isn't worth holding on to, or whatever. And anybody who's attracted to Austrian economics should be sympathetic to that. Logic is kind of your shock-proof B.S. detector in life. It's how you can analyze various arguments that, even if you aren't a specialist, you can see where fallacies lie if somebody's permitted in making that conclusion. And then you can go deeper than that. If you're in an area you're not exactly sure on, and you say, *Okay, the logic good here, but maybe I need to dive a little bit deeper to see if the premises are true*, or something like that. So that's essential to me for like anything. If you want to figure anything out in life, you need to spend at least some time studying logic, and it amazes me how deficient people are in that regard. And that just leads into many of the deficiencies in government schools, I'm sure.

But then there's other skills, as well, that tend to amplify everything. And that's the idea of meta skills, is what are the fewest, most fundamental areas that we can focus on improving that themselves will amplify everything else we do? So we have logic; we have discipline; we have focus; we have persuasion. Now, some of these can be developed directly. Other of these sort of meta skills have to be developed in something specific, like say, meditation or martial arts practice. But then it carries over. The discipline or the focus you learn by practicing meditation will then carry over into practicing a musical instrument or writing a sales page or so on or so forth. So that's what the idea of the meta skills are, is like, what at the bottommost level should we be focusing our time on?

WOODS: Well, in light of that and in light of some of the advice you give in this book, what do you think's wrong with the way most kids are educated? Can you link those two things up?

FLYNN: Yeah, I think I can. I think that the answer there is just the government school system, and that hopefully will resonate with all the listeners of your show [laughing]. I mean, like where is the classical education anymore? Why aren't we teaching kids just — why aren't they handed a book on Socratic logic at least probably by the fourth or fifth grade. That to me is absolutely alarming. You know, you read people, somebody who was a very big influence to me, Tom, I'm sure you're familiar with his work, Mortimer J. Adler.

WOODS: Yeah.

FLYNN: And I think the critiques he makes of the education system are just spot on, both from how they're conducted and who is conducting them. So part of what I did in this book, and hopefully what will make it interesting to anybody who decided to get a copy, was like, if I were the czar of the education system — which I wouldn't want to be. But if I were, here is how I would try to focus the curriculum, or here are the skills that I think we should try to teach our children or our youth that will enable them to become self-directed learners, to think critically about things, because kids, that's it. Fundamentally there is they're just not taught how to think anymore. They're simply taught what to think. And maybe there's some pernicious motivations behind that. I'm inclined to think that there almost certainly is. Or maybe it's just a great deal of ignorance. Most likely, it's some combination of the two of those.

WOODS: It's very frustrating to see — I mean, yes, we can help some kids get out of that system, but the vast majority of people are just going to be churned through it. And then later on in life, they're going to say, *Boy, I wish I had done X or Y*, or, *Boy, I placed too much emphasis on whatever*. And sometimes it's their own fault, and sometimes it's just because that's the path they were put on under these conditions. So I mean, a lot of the stuff I do now and the skills I have, for example, or even just my approach to life, it all came from just learning on my own. Just the idea that I could pick something I like and just go do it, instead of being churned through the usual process of getting the degree, then sitting by the telephone, waiting for somebody to need me. Now, I'm not saying that that can never work, but I don't want to be in that position of sitting by the phone, waiting for somebody to need me. I'll make my own — I know there are people who value the skills that I have, so I'm going to figure out a way to make that work for me. But just this sit-by-the-phone-and-wait-thing just makes me nuts.

FLYNN: Well, well, there's a certain freedom. There's a certain autonomy. I think it was Gary Halbert, one of my famous copywriters, he made it pretty well known that he could never be poor, in the sense that he had all the skills that he needed that, whenever he needed, he could make money for himself. And for him, he was a great copywriter, so he'd just send out a series of sales letters or whatever. Now, he said, he could be broke. He could come onto hard times. He could lose money because he was financially irresponsible, and sometimes he did. But that quote always stuck with me when I was first studying some of the great marketing minds out there. And I think it's in line with what you're saying.

And what I'm trying to push through in this book is that, once you develop yourself to a certain level, once you have these skills — which, you're absolutely right. These are not the skills that you're going to learn in school. You know, my undergrad is in economics. I obviously

didn't emerge a Keynesian. If anything, it just helped to strengthen my convictions in people like Rothbard and so on. But you know, I took all the business classes. I took all the entrepreneurial classes. But nothing that I learned there was any of the stuff that I'm using or doing now. So I guess I hold a certain, if anything, mild resentment of my educational experience, where I think back: well, here's how I wish I could have saved myself those four years and all that money instead, by hiring mentors to teach me these specific skills that I need to do exactly what you're talking about, Tom, to kind of carve out my own path in life, so I don't have to be sitting next to the phone. So I suppose in that sense, a lot of this book was aimed towards myself at any particular age, certainly before 18, are the things that I wish I would have done differently. Now, I'm not resentful of all of it. I obviously have had the opportunity to write this book. But if I could have done things differently or am giving advice to people who are simply in the educational machine now, even if you can't get out of it, at least add this on top.

WOODS: I actually did an episode on copywriting. And we're not saying that you have to have this particular skill or this is the only skill you can get ahead with, obviously. But in the Ron Paul Curriculum, one of the courses teaches copywriting. In other words, again, I have to emphasize for people — I occasionally get people saying, *Why do you have favor copyright?* It has nothing to do with intellectual property; it's copywriting with a W-R-I-T-I-N-G, advertising copy or email marketing copy or whatever, sales page writing, sales letter writing, that sort of thing. That's a skill that, if you've got it, there's no reason for you ever to be poor. And I had Bob Bly on as a guest, because Bob, McGraw-Hill calls him America's best copywriter. So I thought, well, good enough for me, good enough from McGraw-Hill. So I had Bob on; I just had him walk through how would you go about this. For example, if you're just getting started and you have no portfolio, how do you get clients? And I actually just had him answer these specific sorts of questions, and now I've had somebody come to me who's now started his own copywriting firm, because he's just gone on a binge of learning and practicing, and he's darn good now, and he's taking on clients. It's because I had Bob Bly on to say this is a thing to have — I mean, I don't do it full-time, but if I ever really, really were in a pinch and for some reason my podcasts have been shut down or something, I've got a skill that will keep food on my table. And it's just good to have something like that in your pocket. So the point is, in the Ron Paul Curriculum, we teach that not because everybody's going to be a copywriter, but because, wouldn't you like to have a skill that can earn you a serious income from your home in a pinch if you should ever need it? Who on earth wouldn't want that? But we just don't think that way.

FLYNN: Yeah, and to even take it in that general direction, even if somebody doesn't see themselves being a full-time professional copywriter — which I'm not. Like you, I can get the job done and do a fairly decent job with it when I want to or need to. But I know enough about copywriting that I can at least hire other people and assess their abilities.

WOODS: Exactly. You'll know good copy when you see it.

FLYNN: That's exactly it. So especially for business owners, being good to great at a lot of different things doesn't mean you have to do all of them. Hopefully, at some point, you will be doing less and less of them. But if you have no familiarity at all with these skills, then you're bound to pay an ignorance premium. You're going to hire people who you'll have no idea whether they actually are good at this thing or not, and they'll just be wasting your time and money. So even just developing skills to some extent, so that way you can properly assess somebody's copywriting ability or web design or what have you, all the stuff that, again, skills

that you may need, but might not be interested in, that way you can bring the right people on and manage them.

WOODS: All right, you've written a book called *How to Be Better at (Almost) Everything*. And of course, we know everybody's situation is different. But we are still in that time of year where people are aware of their new year's resolutions or maybe are still belatedly making new year's resolutions. Is there a new year's resolution that you could offer generically to people without knowing them that might nevertheless help a good number of these folks?

WOODS: Yeah, I think that there probably is. Everything about skill development is specific, so the first thing I would say is a good generalist really just is a short-term specialist. And what I mean by that is: think of specialization simply as a tool, not the end result or the goal that you're ultimately going for. Rather, can we use specialization to build various pillars in our lives to be more effective generalists? So it is useful to start with something that you're interested in, that's important to you. Easy entry points, I think, to develop some fundamental skills are subjects that obviously already have your attention, whether it's politics or economics or the physical things. Fitness is always a good one. Nutrition is always a good one, because there's always some type of meta skill that we can develop from the specific skill. So for example, just getting into a fitness routine, we talked about the morning routine at the beginning. If you even just dedicate just 20, 15 to 20 minutes of every morning just doing a simple workout — you know, people if people have kettlebells, they can look at any of the number of routines I have on my YouTube channel or website, and just not worrying about perfection. Perfectionism is sort of the enemy of progress.

And that's a good chunk of the first part of my book is saying, like: hey, good enough is going to be good enough for most people most of the time. So there's often this tension that people put up, where they feel like if they can't do something perfectly or in the ideal way, then they might as well not do it at all. So I guess my general advice here is like, see if you can tear that tension down. See if you can ignore that and just get started in the general direction with something. Something focused, something specific, something you're interested in, and practice it frequently. I mean, that's one of the keys to success, as well, is it's not just duration or intensity of practice that makes a person better; it's frequency. How often do you do it? And really, for most skills, from fitness to meditation to learning, having a higher frequency but a lower duration will yield better results over time. So that would be it. If it's important, do it every day.

WOODS: That's really great. And in fact, as I was reading this, I couldn't help thinking — I didn't know your exact age, but I knew you're younger than I am. And I mean, strictly speaking, I'm not quite old enough to be your dad. I would have to have been a high-school dad. But nevertheless, there's a substantial age difference [laughing]. And I couldn't help thinking, *Man, this young whippersnapper really has some advice that even I ought to consider taking*. You know, really, I have some decent routines and stuff to order my life with, but I really, really could benefit by having more order. And the fact that you're out on the West Coast — are you on the West Coast or not?

FLYNN: No, I'm in Philly.

WOODS: All right, well, let's see, I could have sworn — oh, no, I know what it was. I know what it was. When I was first trying to track you down this morning, because I couldn't remember your — I didn't see — I have a new assistant, and I didn't see where he had written

your Skype name. So I was going through my Skype Rolodex, so to speak, and I found a Pat Flynn with many friends we have in common, and it was out in the West Coast. And I'm thinking, *Is this jerk up at 7 in the morning, ready to interview with me?* But then I thought, *Well, I guess he is according to his book.*

FLYNN: Well, maybe, yeah [laughing]. I've been doing plenty of interviews at 7, yep.

WOODS: [laughing] Oh, you're just nuts. All right, so that's some good first advice for folks. But the real advice for folks listening is really, as part of your resolution to make 2019 something special, you really should check out Pat's book, *How to Be Better at (Almost) Everything*. I'm going to link to it at TomWoods.com/1316. And I know that strictly speaking, when January 1st rolls along, I know strictly speaking, nothing really has changed. You know, nothing changes on New Year's Day, as U2 puts it.

FLYNN: That's right. Except for their politics.

WOODS: Yeah, I can't even talk about that. But the thing is, yeah, I know, strictly speaking, it's the same as it was before, but it's just a good, opportune time, when a lot of your fellow human beings are resolved to improving themselves, to get on that bandwagon. How can it be bad? And frankly, I want people who listen to the show, I want people who are in the libertarian community, I want us to be super-duper successful and effective, because we're so outnumbered, we need like ten of us — each person's got to be like ten people. So we've got to be super successful. And you will not, as with so many other books of this type — if I thought this book was full of fluff, I would never have had Pat on the show. I'm so tired of books like this that give you no practical advice. It's all rhetorical flourish and nothing. No, no, no. This book is going to shape you up. And look, even this old fogey who's talking to you right now feels inspired by this book. So start your 2019 with this book. You'll get five or six great New Year's resolution ideas, and you'll be implementing them before January is out, and unlike other folks who will have fallen by the wayside by the end of January, you'll just be getting started. So Pat, any final words before we part for today?

FLYNN: Well, Tom, I've learned a tremendous amount from you and your show and all the work you've done over the years, so to hear you say that you've gotten a little something out of my book brings me great joy. And I just want to thank you again for having me on. I really appreciate it.

WOODS: I absolutely love it, and best of luck with it.