

The *Sweet Lou Brain Performance Challenge*.

These steps can improve your IN-GAME basketball performance and every aspect of your life:

1. **Lower your chronic stress and anxiety:** stress and anxiety launch the “fight / flight / freeze” hormones called adrenaline and cortisol. If that lasts for extended periods of time, it can damage your brain cells. Learn to recognize negative and stress / anxiety producing thoughts. Teach yourself to switch them off and replace them with hopeful, optimistic, relaxing and joyful thoughts. Prayer works for me. Practice a daily meditation, yoga, or mindfulness training. Even LeBron James endorses them (see www.calm.com).
2. **Challenge your brain’s Executive Functions (XF):** the Executive Functions of the brain include begin projects, plan, prioritize, organize, set goals, create a strategy, stay focused, follow directions, anticipate obstacles, monitor progress, new ideas, mental flexibility (Plan B), self-control, learn from mistakes, link past-present-future, working memory, and get things done. If you struggle with any of those, challenge yourself to do better. Also, speed up your **information processing speed** with “specificity”. Repetitions of specific actions create and deepen your brain’s neural pathways, enabling your brain to process information faster. IN-GAME experience, targeted repetitions, jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, online brain games, learning a musical instrument, and reading can help.
3. **Be consistently physically active** with activities that raise your heart rate, promote better blood flow, raise your metabolism and are enjoyable; preferably including some activities with a basketball at your current fitness level. Moving your body moves your circulation which brings more oxygen to your brain. (Get doctor’s authorizations as appropriate).
4. **Be consistently socially engaged:** the more friends and family relationships you enjoy, the better; avoid people that cause you stress and anxiety; chronic isolation is devastating to a healthy brain.
5. **Regular, consistent, and adequate sleep:** possibly the most ignored brain-health activity; take the time to learn about the true value of sleep for brain development and lifelong brain health. Recent studies indicate that 7-9 hours of regular sleep results in the best brain function while more or less sleep shows lower cognitive performance. Create your sleep plan and stick with it.
6. **Have an active faith:** the universal human trait across the globe and through the centuries is the seeking of a higher authority; as a practicing Christian, I know the peace and hope my faith gives me and the value it has been to me.

7. **Novelty and surprises:** your brain loves surprises and new stuff; give it what it craves; do new good things; surprise yourself.
8. **Improve blood circulation and oxygen to the brain:** hands and feet that are significantly colder than your wrists and ankles are possible indications of poor blood circulation and potential damage to arteries. White fingernail beds are also a sign. If those conditions exist, you may **also** have diminished blood flow to your brain, which normally requires 20% of your overall blood flow. Movement may be the greatest promoter of blood and oxygen to the brain.
9. **Support Serotonin activity:** the “feel-good” natural neurotransmitter provides joy, fun, and the natural sense of buoyancy to support you through difficult times and powers up your natural resilience to bounce back faster and stronger; most Americans eat enough protein-rich foods to support healthy serotonin levels; however, **blood-sugar imbalances, chronic stress** and other factors may have a negative impact on serotonin level and general brain health.
10. **Reduce brain inflammation:** the word “inflammation” is from the Latin for “the fire within”. Research appears to show a connection between brain inflammation and mood disorders, such as depression. Possible contributors are high-carb diets, poor blood circulation, chronic stress, alcohol and drug abuse, and environmental pollutants.
11. **Hydrate:** your brain is about 75% water. Proper hydration is vital for effective brain function. Though each person is unique, science appears to show that about a half-gallon of water per day is what your body needs. Dehydration has short-term and long-term bad effects on your brain. Short-term effects include reduced concentration, lower performance, depressed mood, and memory problems. Long-term effects of chronic dehydration may include damage to the brain’s neurons and synapses. Include electrolytes in your hydration plan.
12. **Shield your brain from the TAKERS on the internet and social media.** Though you probably have many friends and loved ones with whom to invest your online time, be prepared for the takers and the evildoers. They are out there. Some are in jobs/careers where their success depends on their ability to find out what makes you tick and use that to **their** advantage, not yours. In children’s TV, there are adults whose job is to ensure that the ads and the show content are not harmful to children. There are no such people online (Netflix Documentary, The Social Dilemma, 2020). Before you go online again—and every time you go online, commit to be true to yourself, to honor the values that you’ve grown up with, to be efficient with your precious time, and to shield your emotions / your brain from those who choose to harm you. Say to yourself: “On this day the takers and the evildoers will not

win”. Then, having locked in your rock-solid self, have fun, enjoy, learn, grow, and be your very best.

13. **Be a warrior in the war on “Social Warfare”:** Social Warfare is the tension politicians, influencers, and the media stir up to fan the emotional flames of people of different political beliefs, races, economic levels, etc. They do this for their own benefit (money and power), not yours. Social Warfare serves their interest because emotionally charged people donate money, vote, and watch more ads. Social warfare does not work for us because the chronic tension is bad for brain health. Social Warfare also drives us into “tribes”. Instead, commit yourself to calm, rational dialogue with people who **do and do not** think like you. You may have to practice extreme forgiveness, calmly listening to another person’s views. Respect all others. **Avoid envy.** If we stop the emotional reactions to those who think differently than us, we might have healthier brains and solve more problems.
14. **Help someone else:** there may be no single activity that touches so many brain health bases as the experience of helping another person.
15. **If you vape or smoke—STOP NOW!!!** “Smoking can damage the endothelium, the thin layer of cells that line blood vessels”. “Smoking causes oxidative stress and inflammation in the brain, which may contribute to cognitive impairment”.
16. **Practice gratitude and savoring—**Do this daily, weekly, whatever works for you. Gratitude is the feeling of thankfulness and appreciation. It is vital to our brain health and our sense of well-being. Write the things you are grateful for. Revisit them. Be grateful for the big things: life, family, God, a friend, a mentor, teacher or care-giver, a sunny morning, etc. Be grateful for the small things: your morning cup of coffee, a walk, a nap, dessert, a lesson learned, a made “3”, etc. Also, when you are in the middle of a moment for which you know you will later be grateful, pause, and **savor the moment**; focus on the joy of the experience. Let it wash over you. Sear the moment into your memory.
17. **Approach every challenge, every major activity, and every new day** with a commitment to **passion and purpose**. Make it a habit to engage every major activity with a higher level of passion and knowledge of your purpose and how each day supports your goals and dreams. (Ward, Christopher, The Skills Center).
18. **Commit to taking no action that you know will—or even might—damage your brain:**
“IT’S THE THING YOU THINK WITH”!

19. Be nutritionally smart: consume brain-healthy foods, beverages and supplements while minimizing sugars, fats, and red meat; also seek to normalize your blood-sugar levels.

20. Beat trauma. To survivors of trauma: for you/us, brain health recovery is a unique and difficult challenge. Trauma can change human brains because human brains prioritize one thing above all: survival. However, unlike ever before in history, there is real hope for recovery and rising to your very best self with a full and joy-filled life. You are here, so you are surviving. Appreciate that victory. Also, you are reading this, so you are continuing to strive. That's another huge win for you and your brain. For the last half-century, thousands of people in the medical and technology professions have dedicated their lives to putting an end to the profound effects of trauma. Modern technology tools are awesome. The people are dedicated. Results are pouring in. People all over the world, wounded by trauma, are healing. Your first step may be to talk to someone. Not just anyone, but a trusted person who might help or steer you toward meaningful help. There are professionals who can help. Talk therapy and prescription medications are possible steps forward. One tool for healing is to write a gentle letter to your traumatized self, acknowledging the injustice, expressing forgiveness, praising your courage under duress, and a commitment to rise to your best self. Know **it's OK to not be OK as long as you have a plan to become OK**. The journey to trauma recovery may be your most exciting adventure, and **your victory over trauma, your greatest achievement.**

21. On March 4, 1993, the NCAA Champion Coach, Jimmy Valvano, gave one of the most moving speeches ever at the ESPN Espy Awards as he accepted the Arthur Ashe Courage Award. I recommend you go online and enjoy and be inspired by it. His primary message: "Don't give up. Don't ever give up" became the motto of the Jimmy V Foundation dedicated to the fight against cancer. He added that a truly full day is one in which you laugh, you think, and you are emotionally moved to tears with joy or sadness (you *feel*). Jimmy V. also stressed "enthusiasm for life", quoting Ralph W. Emerson that "Nothing great can be accomplished without enthusiasm to keep your dreams alive in spite of problems". So, to repeat, **"Don't give up. Don't ever give up."**

Consult with a medical professional before making health, lifestyle, or dietary changes.

See the CNN documentary "**The Last Alzheimer's Patient**" by **Dr. Sanjay Gupta** that shows how some of these steps may actually **reverse** the symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease.

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For more information about our brain's Executive Functions, or, if someone you know is struggling in any of these areas, contact Coach Lou at xfbasketball@gmail.com