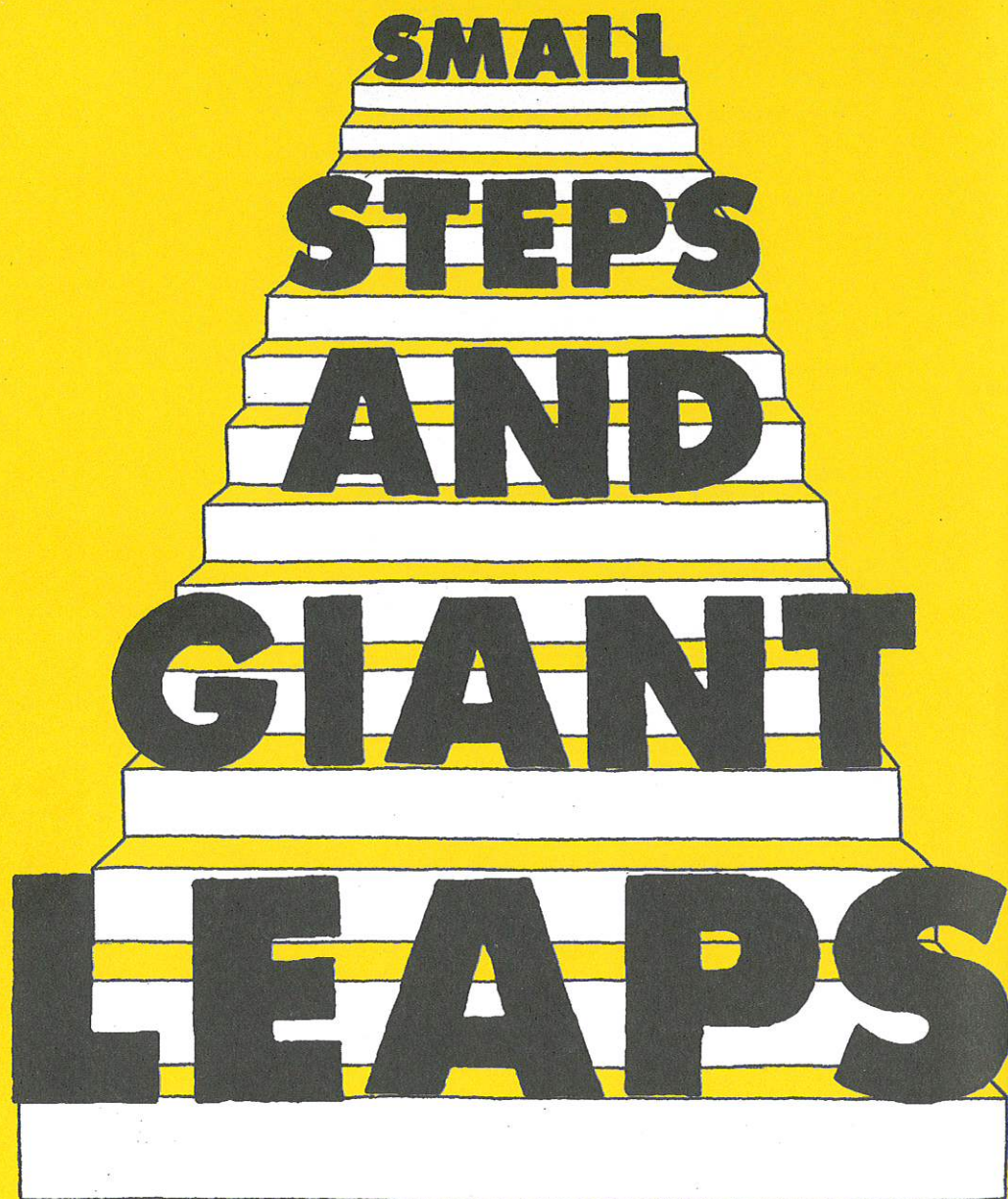




6

It had been the match of their lives, the 2016 Olympic final! But it wasn't over. The game had ended in a draw and the GB women's hockey team were facing a tense penalty shoot-out. They had already pulled off some spectacular play during the match but the team needed to dig deep for a few more minutes if they were to take home the gold.

The crowd watched. The fans at home held their breath. The players calmly stepped up. **And they did it.** Helen Richardson-Walsh and Hollie Webb scored the decisive penalties that sealed their place in history. The team went wild. The players had given their all, and it had paid off.

**BUT IT HADN'T
ALWAYS BEEN
THIS WAY**

At the Olympics in Athens in 2004, GB didn't even qualify to send a women's hockey team. In Beijing they came 6th – there was a long way to go. And people thought Fixed-Mindset things about GB's hockey ability. '**We're not cut out for it,**' they'd say. In London in 2012 things were looking up and the team won a bronze medal. But then disaster struck, their coach retired and the team lost their focus. They came 11th at the World Cup in 2014 – it was a huge setback, and the next Olympics in Rio was only two years away. It was going to be a **mega task** to get the team mojo back, let alone win a medal – and gold was a distant dream.

Something had to be done. So the team made ...

A PLAN.

They had seen the success the British rugby and cycling teams had had with an idea called **Marginal Gains**.

**'MARGINAL
WHAT?
I HEAR
YOU ASK.'**

Marginal Gains sounds quite complicated, but it's actually a super simple and brilliant idea.

Marginal Gains means breaking down a big goal into small parts and then improving each of them, delivering a **huge improvement** in overall performance when you put all the parts back together. So the team got to work. They looked at every single thing that they were going to need to do to win big in Rio. In teeny tiny detail. Let's take a look at just some of what they did ...

THEIR FITNESS

They designed a whole new fitness plan. And everyone had to arrive 10 minutes before training started. Every day. In the past, the team would turn up right on the dot of the start time (some would be late) and they'd spend time getting ready for the first 10 minutes. Taking their headphones off, putting their bags away, filling up their water bottles – you get the picture.

But think about that. 10 minutes a day, 5 days a week, 50 weeks a year – just faffing. It adds up to about 42 hours of lost training **A YEAR**. Wow. That's a whole working week.

Making sure they were 100% ready at the beginning of each session gave them ...

**42
HOURS OF EXTRA
TRAINING TIME.
THAT IS A
MARGINAL
GAIN RIGHT THERE.**



THEIR ATTITUDE

To win an Olympic medal you've got to be in the right mood on the day. You need to be ready. Hyped. Well up for the challenge.

Positively buzzing.

Being in a bad mood is going to be unhelpful to say the least. So, you don't want to be doing anything that is going to make you grumpy. Like sitting on the team bus next to someone who listens to music on the way to the match. How annoying is that – when all you want is dead silence? Or getting changed next to someone who flings their kit around the room like your dad when he can't find his best tennis shorts – when all you want is to be calm and tidy.

*So, they
changed
ALL that.*

They figured out who liked **silence** on the bus. And they sat together. Always. They figured out who liked to listen to music. And they sat together on the bus too. Always. The calm and tidy changers had one side of the changing room, and the messier ones had the other.

These were small changes. But they created routine and improved everyone's mood before their matches. They were still nervous but they were much more **focused** and much less grumpy. These were

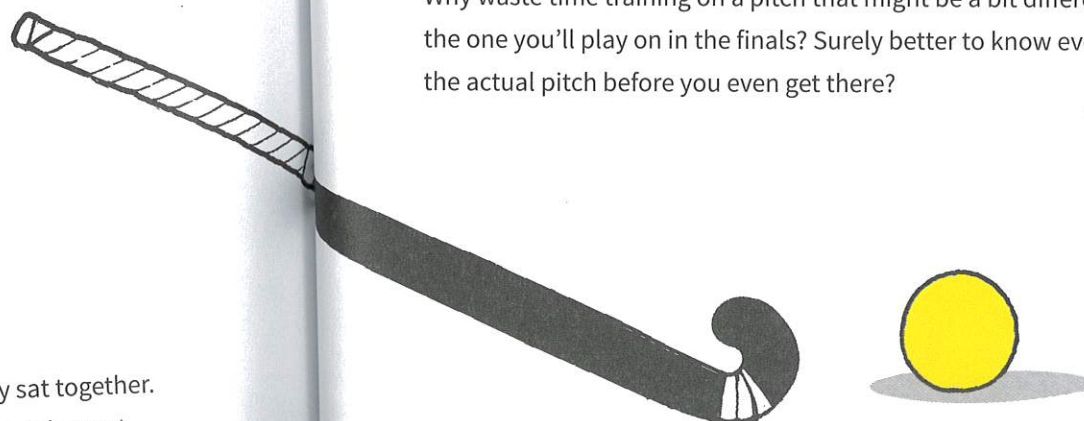
MARGINAL GAINS.

THEIR PRACTICE

We already know that not all practice is equal. And that this team did Thinking Thursdays to ensure their practice making decisions under pressure was super-hard (see page 89).

They also made sure they were practising in as close to 'real' **competition** conditions as they possibly could. They thought about what the weather would be like in Rio in August and practised for that. They even installed an exact replica of the Rio pitch at their training ground so the surroundings would be familiar.

Why waste time training on a pitch that might be a bit different from the one you'll play on in the finals? Surely better to know every inch of the actual pitch before you even get there?



It's not going to win you the Olympics. But it is going to give you another small advantage. Another

MARGINAL GAIN.

And when these dedicated, determined women added up all their Marginal Gains, the sum was a **MASSIVE** gain in performance ...

... it was an
Olympic medal!



Marginal Gains is all about finding and improving the small things that can make a difference. And we can all do this. It doesn't have to be sport, everyone's doing it these days. Businesses are using it to be more efficient and to make more money. Even the Army think it's a good idea. So why can't we do it on our **journey to awesome**?

Whenever we're faced with a big task, it's natural to feel overwhelmed. Let's say an important test is looming at school. We have to revise if we want to do well, but the thought of all that work ahead can make it hard to know where to start.

In this situation, the best advice is to make a revision plan. This means setting up a timetable that helps you to cover everything comfortably within the time available. Some areas will need more attention than others, of course, depending on what you're good at and what needs work. With the plan in place, it's much easier to tick off each task in turn, knowing that you'll be ready when you need to perform.

Breaking your workload down into **achievable** chunks is key to a revision plan, and Marginal Gains takes a similar approach. So here it is in simple steps:

- Take a big task.
- Break it down into smaller parts.
- Assess each part, and shape up those that you could do better.
- Put all the small parts back together for a big improvement in performance.



MEET MARGINAL MATTHEW!

I haven't mentioned **The Block** yet. It's such a big deal, I can't quite believe we are only just getting to it now.

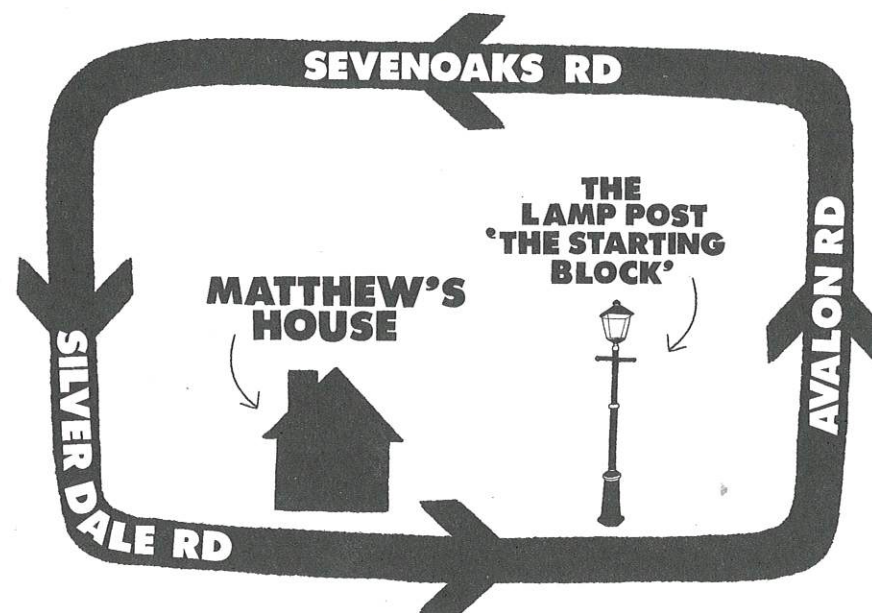
When my brother and I weren't in the garage playing table tennis, we were obsessed (and I mean OBSESSED) with **The Block**. What on Earth (you must be thinking) is **The Block**?

The Block is a hardcore, extreme 850 m pavement racecourse around three streets that surrounded the house where I grew up.

EVERYONE did **The Block** if they came to our house. It was the competition to end all competitions. We timed each attempt and wrote down everyone's results in a notebook that I still have to this day. My mum had a go at it (she walked), while my dad got lost halfway round, which wasn't easy to do. Even the vicar joined in (he was surprisingly fast). You get the picture – everyone had to do it. It was a thing. But it was the competition between me, my brother and our school friends that was most fun.



THE BLOCK



When my brother Andrew broke **The Block's** three-minute barrier it felt like we'd won gold at the Olympics. We went straight round to Auth's (Mark Autherson's) house to tell him, because he had previously held the record at 3 minutes, 1 second. It was an epic day (well, we thought so anyway).

But it didn't stop there. I needed to beat Andrew. He couldn't be top of **The Block**. His name in lights in the results book. No way. Uh-uh.

NOT EVER.

I embarked on a Marginal Gains approach to the situation. I looked at the run, and everything connected to it, and then I broke it down into as many components as I could think of. This was my list (or something close to it. I destroyed the actual list because I didn't want my brother stealing my secrets):

I turned into **MARGINAL MATTHEW.**



*I needed
to win at
The Block
and so I needed a
STRATEGY.*

MATTHEW'S *Marginal Gains* **ASSESSMENT**

THE GOAL To go sub-3 minutes around **The Block** and do the double by beating my brother.

MY EXERCISE ROUTINE

I'm busy at school during the week, and I practise table tennis in the evenings. I swim on Wednesdays and run with my dad on Sundays (he needs me to stop him getting lost).

MY SLEEP PATTERN

I love reading in bed, and sometimes that means I stay up late. On Fridays, I often have a sleepover at a friend's house.

MY DIET

I try to eat healthily most of the time, but sometimes I skip breakfast in case I'm late for school!

MY RUNNING GEAR

My running shoes are brand new. I only have a winter top with long sleeves, which means sometimes I get too hot.

MY PRE-RUN ROUTINE

I am pretty fit but probably don't do enough stretching to warm up.

MY PREVIOUS RUNS

I often start too quickly, which can ruin my race. If I get the pace right, I know my finishing sprint is strong.

With all the components laid out in front of me, I was able to look at each one in turn. It made it easier to figure out what was going to help me to achieve the goal of beating my brother. I wrote down what needed to change if I was going to win. I also made a point of highlighting what worked.

MY EXERCISE ROUTINE: I aim to make our Sunday run longer and slower. This will help me to build up stamina.

MY SLEEP PATTERN: I will get an early night on Friday, before the run, and make Saturday nights for sleepovers.

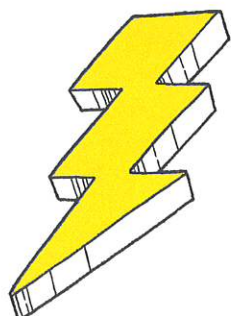
MY DIET: Stop skipping breakfast! It's an important meal.

MY RUNNING GEAR: Save up for a short-sleeved running top.

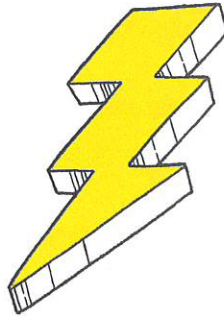
MY PRE-RUN ROUTINE: No change. Keep it up!

MY PREVIOUS RUNS: Start out steadily and build up the pace towards a strong finish.

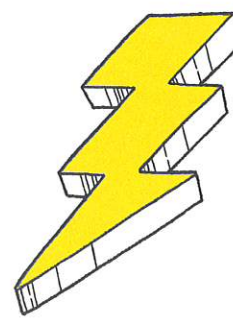
So things started to shape up nicely:



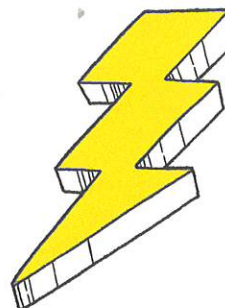
<i>Week</i>	<i>Time</i>
1	3 mins, 25 secs
2	3 mins, 27 secs
3	3 mins, 21 secs
4	3 mins, 15 secs
5	3 mins, 12 secs



It was looking good. I had set out to fine-tune everything that went into my performance, and I was starting to see an improvement. All those seemingly small details were beginning to add up. The awesome thing was that it started to become even more fun. Andrew was watching my strategy and trying figure out one of his own, too. So, we were both improving, both pushing each other on. We even started to do **The Block** together, which meant that if one of us was thinking of coasting, the other would have something to say about it. We even did it in the middle of the night once (DO NOT DO THIS by the way. It is dark and there are a lot of hazards about). In the end, I broke the three-minute mark, and in the following few weeks, went even faster.



<i>Week</i>	<i>Time</i>
6	3 mins, 02 secs
7	2 min, 55 secs
8	2 mins, 49 secs



My brother beat his personal best, too, which made me really proud of him (I may not have told him this at the time). We were still battling to be top dog but the competition was making us both better.

By the way, we've still got the results book. My mum and dad still live there. The competition is still open – just in case you want to have a go at **The Block** next time you're in Reading ...



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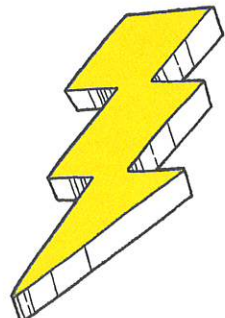
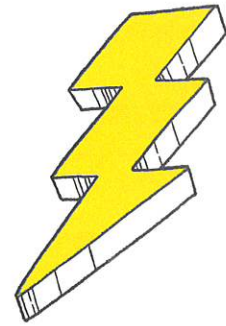
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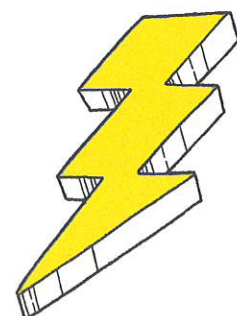
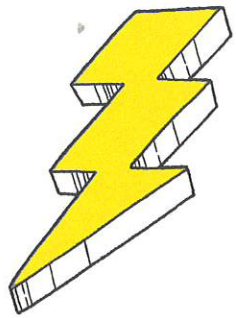
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MATTHEW'S EXAMS

Marginal Gains ASSESSMENT

What's brilliant about Marginal Gains is that it can help to shape up your preparations in every way. Take exams, for example. When revision looms, it's easy to become panicked when you think about how much work you have to cover. A Marginal Gains approach helps you to reduce anxiety by looking at everything that goes into the revision process, breaking it down into smaller components and then building it back up with confidence.

Let's see how Marginal Matthew (i.e. 12-year-old me) took his approach to be the best around **The Block** and applied it to his bid to get great grades.

THE GOAL To improve on my exam results from last year

○ REVISION PLAN

I need to divide my subjects by the time available. By sticking to the plan, and building in regular breaks, I can cover everything without getting over-anxious and tired.

○ MY DESK

The table in my bedroom has a wonky leg. It wobbles when I work and makes my handwriting hard to read. Fix the leg (or at least prop it up with a book).

○ LIGHTING

Replace the bulb in my desk lamp so I'm not squinting at my books.

○ EXERCISE

Use at least one break time to run around **The Block**. Not only do I want to beat Andrew, exercise is a really good way to beat exam stress.

○ MY PENCILS AND PENS

During my mock exams, I wasted the first few minutes sharpening a blunt pencil and then begging a teacher for a replacement pen as mine had run out of ink. Reclaim those vital minutes by checking my pencil case is properly packed.

○ PAST PAPERS

Get the exam papers from the previous few years. That way I'll be able to see what the examiners are looking for, and get a feel for the way questions are worded so it will seem familiar when I take the real exam.

○ HOMEMADE MOCK TESTS

This is perhaps the most important thing of all: do a paper in my bedroom under test conditions. Set a timer and get used to working under a time constraint so the real thing doesn't come as a shock. And ask my teacher to mark my paper. After all, feedback is vital if I want to improve.

○ SHOWER GEL

Make sure Mum doesn't buy that stuff that makes me itch. On the big day, I want to be focusing on my exam and not wriggling uncomfortably like I've sat on an ants' nest.

How far you take Marginal Gains is up to you. The key is to be **smart**, **practical** and **positive** in your approach. With the changes in place:

- Keep checking how things are going. If you have to experiment or tinker to improve things, that's fine!
- Learn from any mistakes. Failure is the key to improvement.
- Practise, practise and practise again.
- Be patient. Stay cool and focused. The right attitude brings its own rewards.

But what happens if we're pursuing a goal that requires some kind of performance? Whether it's a dance routine or a sporting fixture, an exam or display, that one final challenge on your journey to becoming awesome might just prove make or break. So, let's look at how to make the experience one of triumph instead of tears ...

OVER TO YOU: GETTING THOSE GAINS

Think about how you can apply this Marginal Gains plan to the things you really want to get good at. It could be:

EXAMS

SKATEBOARD FLIPS

FLUTE PRACTICE

WRITING POETRY

LEARNING A LANGUAGE

A CLASS DEBATE

you name it.

Then make a Marginal Gains plan. Break the challenge down into smaller parts, and work out how you can improve each one.