PSYCHOLOGY & HUMAN NATURE

The Winner Effect: The Neuroscience of Success and Failure

by Ian H. Robertson

Winning changes your brain and makes you likelier to win again. Power does the same - and can rot judgment.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Winning rewires your brain to win again.**

Victory raises testosterone, which tunes up the brain's reward and aggression circuits and lifts your odds in the next contest. Biologists see the loop across the animal world - and in traders, athletes, and their fans.

02 **Stack small, winnable victories to build momentum.**

The most driven people set achievable goals, bank the win, then set the next one. Even a win over a weak opponent triggers the chemistry - Mike Tyson's comeback was deliberately fed easy fights first.

03 **Losing loops too: repeated defeat teaches helplessness.**

Losses push stress hormones up and drive down. Worse, people deprived of control stop looking for escape even when one opens up - the loser effect becomes a cage built by expectation.

04 **The drive to achieve is learned, not born - and talent praise can kill it.**

Children praised for being smart start avoiding anything they might fail; children praised for effort keep striving. Even the children of geniuses, like Picasso's son Paulo, often stall in the shadow.

05 **Power aims your brain at goals and switches off risk alarms.**

Power raises testosterone and narrows attention to rewards. Robertson's Blair-versus-Clinton contrast: the powered-up leader stops taking other perspectives, stops hearing bad news, and mistakes confidence for control.

06 **Winning is chemically addictive - like power, money, or cocaine.**

Testosterone surges trigger dopamine surges in the brain's reward system, and dopamine makes you crave the next hit. That is the loop behind executives who keep raising the stakes until they crash.

07 **Aim your power at a shared goal - it cools the corrupting chemistry.**

Robertson splits power into p-power (for yourself) and s-power (for a group's goal). S-power dampens testosterone, acting as a coolant; a real winner, he argues, benefits others, not only himself.

08 **Status and control are health currencies: winners literally live longer.**

Oscar winners outlive equally famous nominees by about four years, and Nobel winners outlive nominees too. Secure status plus a sense of control means less toxic stress running through the body.

09 **Feeling in control is a stress shield - and it can be built.**

People who believe they can influence events withstand stress that breaks the helpless. Military survival trainees with a strong sense of control endure far better; control is a trainable mindset, not a fixed trait.

10 **Too much winning ends in overreach and a crash.**

A long streak dulls empathy, inflates risk appetite, and surrounds leaders with silence. Robertson tours Enron and bank bosses like Fred Goodwin of RBS, whose victories primed the reckless bets that destroyed them.

11 **Context hands out the first wins - so design yours.**

A drab cichlid fish that inherits territory turns bright, aggressive, and dominant within days; mice only get the winner effect on home ground. Hierarchies, mentors, and home turf decide who starts a streak.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

In biology, the winner effect is simple: an animal that wins a fight becomes more likely to win the next one, even against stronger opponents. Winning changes the body - testosterone rises, the brain's reward system tunes up, and confidence and appetite for risk follow. Neuroscientist Ian Robertson argues the same machinery runs in humans: success is partly a chemical habit.

The book opens with a puzzle - why do the children of the great so often fail? Pablo Picasso's son Paulo drank himself into obscurity. Robertson's answer starts with motivation: the drive to achieve is learned, fed by small achieved goals and by praise for effort rather than talent. Fixed labels ('you're so smart') make children protect the label instead of taking risks.

Then comes the animal evidence. A drab male cichlid that inherits a dead rival's territory transforms - color, aggression, brain chemistry - into a dominant winner. City traders earn more on high-testosterone days; football fans' testosterone rises and falls with their team. Winning and losing are both self-reinforcing loops, and context - home ground, hierarchy, early chances - decides who gets which loop.

Power gets the longest warning. Winning and ruling trigger the same chemistry, and power narrows the mind to goals while blunting empathy, caution, and the ability to take another's view - visible in Robertson's paired portraits of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. In the final act the chemistry turns addictive: testosterone feeds dopamine, dopamine demands more, and unchecked streaks end in the overreach of Enron and Fred Goodwin's RBS.

The hopeful thread runs through the Oscars chapter: Oscar winners outlive nominees by about four years, because status and a sense of control shield the body from toxic stress - and both can be built. Aim power at goals bigger than yourself (what Robertson calls s-power), stack small real wins, and keep checks around anyone on a streak, including yourself. Some of the science rests on animal studies and debated findings, so read it as a strong lens, not settled law.

DO THIS WEEK

Design a winning streak this week: pick three small, real challenges you can beat in the next seven days, schedule them, and finish all three before attempting anything bigger. Then point the confidence at something beyond yourself - a win that also wins for someone else.

The Winner Effect by Ian H. Robertson, first published 2012. Robertson is a neuroscientist and Professor of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin. For competitors, coaches, and leaders who want the science of momentum - and its dangers.