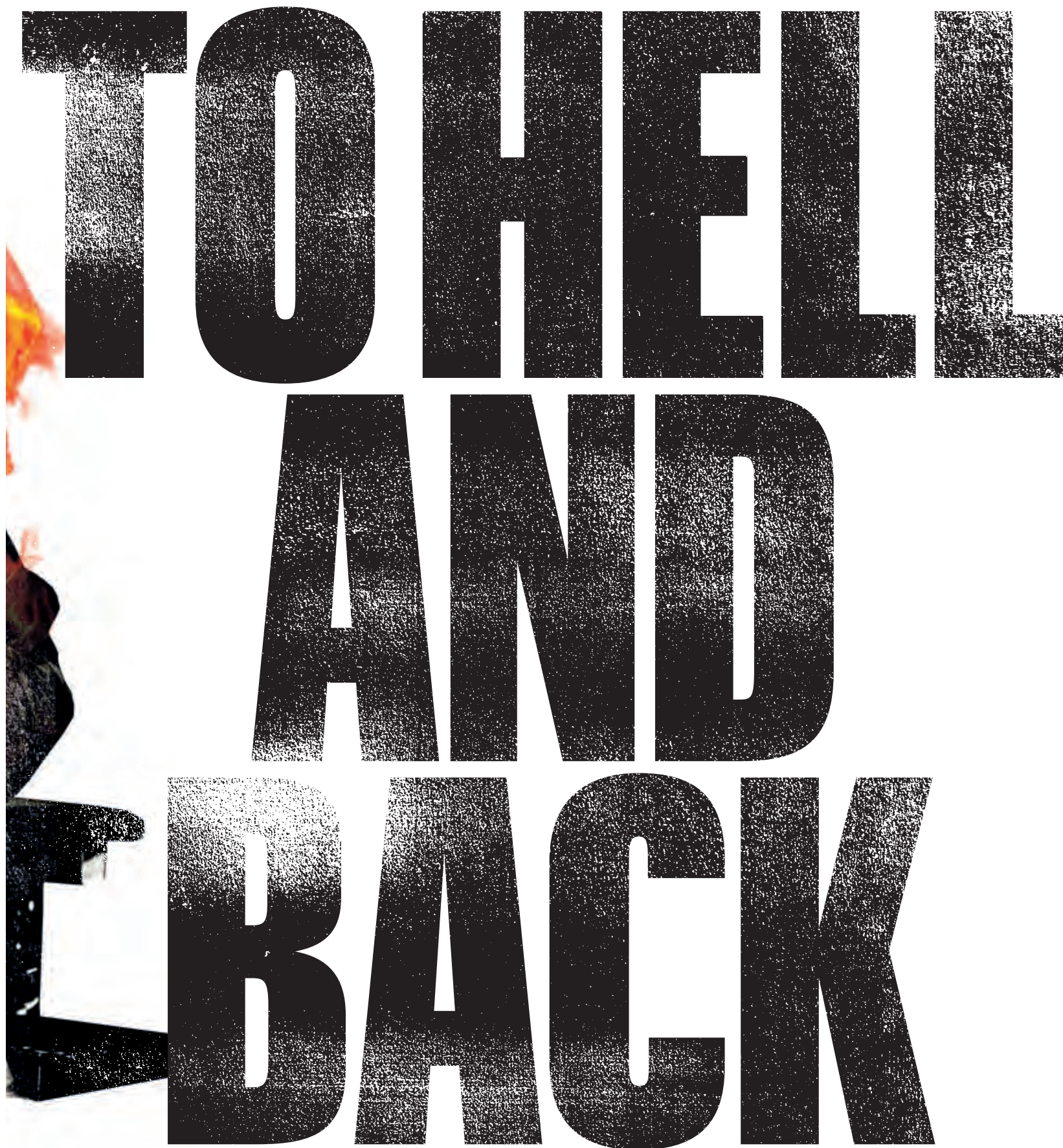


From being a drunk at death's door to a coach changing people's lives, Nic Ingel is proof that the hardest battles are fought and won within. Here are the six rules that have helped keep him driven, focused, and taking his life back one rep at a time.

BY KIERAN LEGG



TO HELL AND BACK



When Nic Ingel walked out of rehab, that's when life started to kick the crap out of him. For decades, despite the turmoil in his own head, alcohol had been his refuge – a safe shelter from the storm he feared would swallow him whole in his sober moments.

But now, that magic elixir had been shelved. He was finally taking on the world, with no place to run – “And it hurt”.

Dark memories bubbled to the surface; every day he woke to a slideshow of forgotten pain and childhood trauma. He remembered his mother on one of her many drug binges, cold and distant, or screaming. Over and over he heard the gunshot when his stepfather killed himself just a few metres away from where he was playing on the stairs as a toddler. He saw the faces of the men who had raped him as a child, their features twisted and menacing in these fuzzy recollections.

It's a sucker punch most alcoholics don't have the emotional training to deal with, admits Nic.

“We thrive in chaos; but when things quieten down, that's when the demons come out.”

The past 12 years haven't been easy for Nic. He feels like a man under attack from every direction, haunted by his past, surviving the present, and trying to figure out what's waiting around the corner in the future. And while every year he's reached that same point – where he's told himself, “There's no way I can do this” – he hasn't touched alcohol again. Instead, he's found salvation in fitness, creating Emet Gyms – a place where addicts and the average Joe alike can emulate his recovery and engineer their own redemption.

Despite Nic's success, the struggles haven't changed. While he wakes up each morning raring to go, he's still processing a backlog of suppressed memories, and grappling with ever-evolving anxieties. In the past, that introspection would've driven him straight to the nearest bar; but today, he stays sober by following six simple rules:

1 / SLOW THE F*\$% DOWN

“People badmouth analysis paralysis; but for an addict, it's not a bad thing,” says Nic. He knows the pitfalls of enthusiasm, that chasing new highs can often lead to new lows. Back during his first few years of sobriety, the salesman left Joburg for a business opportunity in the Mother City. It was a shaky premise from the start – it wasn't clear how he was going to make money, or even if there was any money to be made – but he never took a second to weigh up the pros and cons. He has an infomercial playing in his head: “I'm telling myself, if I don't do this now, I'm going to miss this once-in-a-lifetime exclusive offer – you



know? I've got to jump on it." Just a few weeks in, he was losing cash – fast. He moved out of his upmarket apartment to a bug-infested room in a rough neighbourhood, and lived off the expired scraps piled on a table at the local supermarket at closing time. As a recovering addict, he needed stability, he needed space to work through those first few raw years of sobriety. Sitting there with no money to his name and eating stale bread, it was a wake-up call that he had to start exercising caution. While he was saved from his poor decisions by a R2 000 loan from a generous friend – which, at the time, was just enough money to drive back to Joburg and start all over again – he knew he was one more bad decision away from a relapse. When he's given a new opportunity now, Nic now asks himself: "How will this serve me? Am I safe in this? Is this good for me now? If yes, why I am saying this?" It's an analytical approach that's unfamiliar territory for most addicts, who fill the void left behind by their addictions with a whirlwind of relationships, experiences, and rash

decisions. Now, instead of saying "Yes", Nic prefers "I'll get back to you in a bit". It gives him time to mull things over and arrive at an answer with healthy consequences, helping him find a path that benefits him psychologically and financially.

2/ FORGET MAKING YOUR BED – CREATE A ROUTINE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

In his speech at the University of Austin, Admiral William H. McRaven said that if you want to change the world, start by making your bed. The lesson is a simple one: that seemingly insignificant routine activities can spur you on to make better decisions and take more pride in what you do. Nic says making his bed has never made a difference in his life, but he still agrees with the admiral: "When you set basic routines

and create a framework, it's easy to figure out when you've started to veer off course."

Nic runs his own gym, is building a company, and travels to different universities to speak to students about addiction. It's a busy schedule made possible by Nic's unrelenting work ethic; but sometimes, the daily grind can turn into an all-consuming beast. "When things get hectic, I start skipping meals; and then, before I know it, I'm shelving my daily routines," he says. When this structure collapses, life can start to feel chaotic. It's a breeding ground for anxiety, the nemesis of any recovering addict. But Nic isn't worried. He's written down his routines and knows exactly how to restore order. "I've formalised my self-care routines throughout the day. If I want to feel better, I know exactly what steps to take get back on track." His daily routine doesn't involve making the bed: it's a personalised approach that takes care of his needs. "You have to have your own rulebook tailored to what you want from life. If making the bed makes you feel better, write it down and do it like clockwork."



3/ TALK TO YOURSELF, YOU'RE AWESOME

When he was still drinking every day, Nic would wake up in an empty room, the air thick with the stench of stale beer. He dreaded that moment – not because of the splitting headache or the vague memories of the night before swirling in his mind, but because he had to confront himself.

“I remember being angry at myself,” he says. “Why have you done this to me again? Why do you keep doing this to me? You’re so stupid, why can’t you just stop?”

Self-loathing had dug its claws into him and wouldn’t let go. And each new trauma – his teacher telling him he wouldn’t amount to anything, and his mother’s friends molesting him – seemed to tighten its grip.

“Self-loathing erodes our quality of life,” he says. “It’s so powerful, it undermines everything. It’s an emotion that tells you not to value yourself and leaves you incapable of dealing with your issues.”

In many ways, it was the feeling that pushed him to surrender himself to the bottle.

However, in the first few weeks of recovery, Nic decided to take a stand. When he woke up, he would walk up to the bathroom mirror and said: “Look here man, you’re awesome, you’re cool, you’ve got this.”

He caught flak from the other guys, but it didn’t matter; his little mantra was already starting to work its magic. This slogan evolved into its own mini-therapy session, expanding from “you’re cool” to including five recent accomplishments or three reasons why he was “awesome”.

“Learning positive reinforcement is a skill you have to work on,” he says. “I spent most of my life picking out what I don’t like about myself, and now I’m pulling that negativity in the opposite direction.”



4/ IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU, IT'S ABOUT THEM

Back in the day, when it came to dealing with criticism, Nic had a simple routine: "Crack open a bottle, and drink until you stop caring". Without that foolproof coping mechanism, the coach found himself treading water every day. Small comments were enough to put him over the edge, sowing scattered seeds that bloomed into a swirling anxiety the next day. Was he really a terrible guy? Was he fooling himself into thinking he'd amount to anything? At times, it felt like the pain would be enough to drag him back down and undo a decade of sobriety. But over the years he's learnt to process these thoughts; and in these bleak moments of introspection, he's tapped into an epiphany that has helped him process criticism and judgment.

"I realised that the way people treat us, the way they talk to us and what they say to us, often has nothing to do with us," he says. "It's their filter, it's how they see and process the world, how they deal with what they're going through."

5/ BUILD YOUR LIFE AROUND DOING WHAT YOU LOVE

Nic spent the majority of his life working as a salesman. By his account – and his friends' – he was a natural, able to think on the spot and charm potential clients even on the heels of another alcohol binge. When he left rehab, he jumped back into the same field. However, without the refuge of a beer (or two), he would go home every night feeling empty. He wasn't passionate about what he was doing, but he felt pressure to find something – anything – to fill the vacuum left behind by his drinking. He started working out every day, using rocks and sandbags to bolster his routines. Before long he was training the older women staying at his apartment complex. They paid just R50 a session. But it wasn't about

the money: "Training was fulfilling – it was this missing piece I had finally found to complete the puzzle."

Those backyard routines have evolved into corporate gigs training staff at some of the country's biggest companies. His gym (Emet) is the nucleus of this fledgling fitness empire, a space where he trains recovering addicts, teaching them how to harness lifts, carries and holds to combat their urges.

"I was drawn in," he says. "It's such a great feeling to be able to pass on these skills, to equip others with ways to improve their lives."

In those first training sessions, when he was just a man carrying bricks around an empty parking lot, Nic saw the foundations of future happiness.

"I understood that if I was going to survive out here, I needed to build my career around doing what I love."

6/ FIND SOMEONE WHO CALLS YOU OUT ON YOUR BS

"When you're an addict, you lie, you manipulate, you deceive and you control," says Nic. "It's second nature." When he was drinking, Nic found himself lying more and more each day. It was an act of desperation, a way to hide the addiction that was slowly eroding his life. He was deceiving his boss, manipulating his friends, and lying to himself.

"I don't have a problem, I'm fine," he remembers thinking. "I'm not an alcoholic."

It was during recovery that he discovered that those lies had been a slippery slope, a quick ride back to the same old habits. In contrast, the truth was liberating. It was an opportunity to confront himself and tackle emotions and memories he'd left dead and buried years ago.

"Now, I make sure to surround myself with people who call me out on my BS," he says. "I have sponsors, I have meetings, I have made the right kind of friends – the type of people who will hold me accountable."

For Nic, living life honestly is the only way to make real progress. He knows how even the smallest lies can spin out of control and leave you stranded. ■

