



Sgt. 1st Class Sean Acosta accepts the NCO of the Year award Oct. 8, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Joe Lacdan)

Best Warrior Competition

A Guide on How to Win

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Every October, 22 of the best Soldiers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from every major command in the Army meet at Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia in a quest to earn the title of the *Army's Best Warrior*. Preparing for this competition and selecting the competitors is a process that demands special attention from leaders and competitors that goes far beyond just preparing for a regular board.

Boards vs. Competitions

Unfortunately, the term "Soldier/NCO of the Month board" conjures some mixed feelings amongst our ranks. I remember very well my experiences with Soldier of the Month boards. They consisted of buying the study guide at Military Clothing Sales Stores, dry cleaning my uniform, and having my wife ask me questions until I

had memorized the entire book. The boards were often in the form of a high stress interview – I either knew the answer or I didn't. Regardless, I was always treated professionally. I won some and lost some, but participating in boards was a great experience for me as a young Soldier because it forced me to study and learn more about the Army as a whole.

Despite the learning experiences Soldiers gain by participating in boards, they sometimes get a bad reputation. Throughout my career, I have heard the term "board Soldier" used in a derogatory manner. This term is often used to describe a Soldier who excels in formal boards, but crumbles under the physical and mental stress of an actual deployment. Sgt. Maj. of the Army (SMA) Daniel A. Dailey designed the Army's Best Warrior Competition (BWC) to eliminate that notion.

The winner of this competition would certainly not be a “board Soldier.” The competition is specifically designed to identify the Soldier who can best thrive in adversity, display physical and mental toughness, demonstrate an expertise across the entire spectrum of military tasks, and can apply their knowledge in fast-paced, combat-like scenarios.

The BWC is not a board. It is a competition. The following is some advice for Soldiers and leaders on how to prepare a Soldier to win the Army’s BWC.

Advice for Commands and Leaders

1. Hold Monthly Boards

I know that sounds obvious, but under the strain of a high operational tempo, boards are usually the first casualty. Find ways to protect the boards, even if you have to do them in the field. As a battalion command sergeant major, I utilized my headquarters company first sergeant to run monthly boards. I viewed these very much as proving grounds to get Soldiers ready for the brigade board. I preferred the board members to mentor the candidates and offer feedback as help. I wanted them to identify our best candidate, but also prepare them to win at the next level, both mentally and physically.

At the battalion level, keep it simple. Conduct an Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) as well as a simple event like a road march to a rifle range, or a land navigation course. Your goal is to give your candidates enough stress, both in the boardroom and outside in the elements, that you can see who your best competitors will be.

At the brigade and division level, a more deliberate approach to the competition is necessary. The addition of a longer road march (12 miles or more), obstacle courses, and expert infantryman badge (EIB) style stations can truly help evaluate Soldier proficiency. In the BWC, the formal board is not weighted any more or less than any other station. So again, if a training plan places more emphasis on the board than the other aspects of the competition, your competitor will lose.

2. Pick Your Best

In the opening scene from the movie *Troy*, King Agamemnon calls for his best warrior, Achilles, to fight for all the Spartans. I view selecting your competitors in the same fashion – you are looking for your Achilles. The NCO competition is open to the ranks of corporal through sergeant first class. I think

sergeant first class is the optimal rank to win this competition because they have the best blend of experience, confidence, and overall self-awareness to excel. This is not to say a corporal or sergeant couldn’t win – they can and they have. But in my experience, sergeants first class and senior staff sergeants perform better overall.

3. Support Your Competitor

As a leader, you are sending your Soldier or NCO to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete and earn a title at the highest level. They deserve the leadership’s full support, as the prestige and recognition shines on the entire unit. Best Ranger competitors are often placed on special duty to prepare for the Best Ranger Competition (BRC). We should think of our BWC competitors in the same way.

One thing that helped us win the BWC, was at the battalion level we sequestered our competitors and allowed them space and time to focus on the competition. We decided that after the competitors won the division and major Army command boards, this competition should be their sole mission and they should be removed from their daily duties so they can continue preparing for their events. It was tough losing a sergeant first class platoon sergeant for several months, but it was worth it in the end, because they were representing much more than just our battalion.

Another thing that can be done to improve a Soldier’s chances of winning is giving your competitors a coach, preferably someone with experience at the BWC. At the battalion level, we had a Sergeant Audie Murphy Club member mentor our candidates. At the division level, this is easily done and it can make all the difference in



Army Staff Sgt. Ifegwu Ifegwu walks to a rendezvous point during the 2018 Headquarters Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., October 2, 2018. The Best Warrior Competition recognizes Soldiers who demonstrate commitment to the Army Values, embody the Warrior Ethos and represent the future of the force. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joseph Friend)

the world for the competitors to have someone pushing them, but also someone with the support of the division command sergeant major to help the competitors with resourcing ammo and range time, physical training, and leveraging other local training like Expert Field Medical Badge and EIB.



Spc. Caden Emmons clears a stoppage in his weapon during a live-fire exercise during the 2018 Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Oct. 2, 2018. The Best Warrior Competition recognizes Soldiers who demonstrate commitment to the Army values, embody the Warrior Ethos and represent the future of the force. (Photo courtesy of 55th Signal Company)

Advice for Competitors

1. Know What You are Signing Up For

The BWC is extremely challenging. I witnessed several competitors this past year arrive and think they were simply going to a board. After the first 24 hours, the look of shock on their faces suggested that they were woefully unprepared. Competitors must come to the competition ready. To give you an idea of what ready means, consider these event goals: If you can't roadmarch unknown distances (12-20 miles) throughout varied terrain, and continue to operate at a high level, you will lose. If you haven't picked up a map and compass and completed multiple iterations of day and night land navigation (not walking roads) then you have no chance of winning this competition. If you can't load, unload, correct malfunctions, and engage threats with every small arms weapon in the Army inventory, you are unprepared. Your ability to look professional in your Army service uniform and answer questions to a board is important – but it is such a small component of the BWC experience. Yet, somehow, this still receives the "lion's share" of preparation emphasis.

2. It's a Long Fight

From the time you step into your Battalion Soldier of the Month board to the time the sergeant major of the

Army hands you the trophy for winning the BWC, we are talking anywhere from six months to a year. Prepare yourself for a long haul and be mentally prepared for the trials and stress this process will place on you and your family. The support of your chain of command, family, and coach will make all the difference getting you through these tough times.

3. It Takes Discipline and Dedication

My battalion was lucky enough to have the winner of the 2017 BWC Soldier of the Year competition. We also took third place in the 2017 NCO of the Year competition. This level of performance took a large and sustained amount of focus and discipline. When the time came to send both of these competitors to Fort A.P. Hill for the competition, they had the utmost confidence of the entire unit leadership because of their demonstrated passion and work ethic. They had sought every opportunity to practice and had built up a remarkable level of fitness and knowledge which reflected in their performance.

4. If You are Going to Study, Read the Army Manual

We didn't have easy access to doctrine in the 1990s via the Army online publishing directorate that we have today. Now most (if not all) Army manuals can be found online. For our battalion boards, I encouraged my first sergeants to give careful thought to the board questions and to use the doctrine as their base, not an online study guide or something you buy at the Post Exchange.

Is it really possible to read every manual? Not likely, but it's easy to look through and pick the foundational information that is important to know. During the board phase, you will more than likely get some obscure question wrong, but you should not get a principle or foundational concept wrong.

Another good study source, especially for local boards, are the local "blue books" and policy letters. As NCOs, our credibility is grounded in technical and tactical proficiency – use every opportunity to get your competitors' heads into doctrine.

5. Don't Be Discouraged if you Fail

The battalion I served in won the U.S. Army Pacific NCO of the Year Competition two years in a row. Would it surprise you if I told you both of these eventual champions suffered some defeats along the way?

The 2017 BWC competitor lost our brigade NCO of the Year (NCOY) board, but because he had won a division (DIV) NCO of the Quarter board, he was eligible to compete in the DIV NCOY board, and later defeated the NCO who had beat him at the brigade board.

In 2018, we sent our NCO competitor to the brigade NCO of the Quarter board three times before he finally won. After that win, he went on to win DIV NCO of the Quarter and Year, and U.S. Army Pacific NCO of the



Army Staff Sgt. Cesar Gonzalez takes protective measures during the 2018 Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Oct. 2, 2018. The Best Warrior Competition recognizes Soldiers who demonstrate commitment to the Army values, embody the Warrior Ethos and represent the future of the force. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Connor Kelly)

Year. I think both of these NCOs gained some valuable strength and experience from failure – neither were dissuaded and both were eventually successful.

Your Ticket to BWC 2019

Next October, 22 competitors will again meet at Fort A.P. Hill for BWC 2019. You could very well be one of the competitors. And if you prepare yourself properly, you'll have a great chance of winning this competition. But the time to start training is now. If you can commit fully to this process and endure the physical and mental hardship and stress that comes with the competition, you

have everything you need to be the champion. Volunteer for your battalion and brigade level boards, and win or lose, keep going.

If you are a leader and want to produce the next champion, you'll have to build a program that will select your best candidates and help them prepare. It takes support from the entire unit to win this event; from an exceptional Soldier, a supportive family, and a chain of command that understands the significance and challenges associated with competing in the BWC.

Good luck! And we hope to see you at Fort A.P. Hill in October for BWC 2019.■

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