

High Performing Teams

Enhancing Rugby Performance: Foundational Psychological Elements to a Higher Purpose

“There is no quick path to building the foundations of long-term success”

"Loyalty in sport has not gone, it's just been misunderstood. In the good organisations, loyalty exists and in the great organisations, it is the foundation." Ben Darwin

Rugby, as a sport, embodies numerous interrelated factors that contribute to a team's success. Establishing a high-performance environment requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing philosophies and principles of vision, leadership, talent, coaching, team culture, tactical readiness, physical fitness, continuous evaluation, innovation, resilience, athlete understanding, game comprehension, and a higher purpose. Sitting in a room with 30 future high performing coaches, and looking around to see an abundance of talent across all of these areas, as well as many different cultural backgrounds suggests and exemplifies such diversity, experience, skill sets and complexities of our great game.

To explain the quantification of high performance in sport and rugby I will digress and provide a personal anecdote. Coming from a sporting background, quantitative measures are all I have known as an outcome of performance. Including, times, score lines, personal bests or “PB’s” had been the main controlling point of my life. The times that I have achieved, results of matches, statistical data given on both team and individual basis, and many other means of numerical forms of feedback, defined my sporting competency. What was rarely questioned, explained or trained was the why? How I or anyone is feeling when he or she stands on the starting line, what type of a day have they had, how resilient was this particular athlete to competition, and how does anyone cope with the often self-imposed pressure to perform. These questions were rarely asked and never answered. As a coach and now having transitioned from athlete, where I am on my own personal journey almost seeking meaning to why we do what we do. Deep I know. Before we dive into thought provoking interactions, through this essay, I will attempt cover foundational psychological literacy and its impact on the tactical measures of rugby, and as importantly

how they connect together for sustainability of high performing teams. In aim to grasp a deeper understanding of who these teams are, what qualities they share, who drives them and is it possible to bridge the gap and provide a high performance setting for my own club. I have realised there has been an over reliance on purely quantitative measures which has neglected and taken away from all social and cultural variables that qualitative forms research may provide. So having not only reflected on my own journey and in particular the last 9 months of attempting to create our own sustainable model of success within the Shute Shield, have visited and researched other high performing teams and individuals within Australia and across the globe asking these questions, as I feel its current and aligned with answers needed within our domestic and international teams inside Australia.

What comes first? Theming has become quite a big feature within and amongst professional sporting teams. Teams and individuals connecting to stories of inspiration, creating a common focus point and understanding of why they do what they do. Building connection with each other to essentially draw upon a purpose and clarity to go out and perform. We begin famously, with the Boston Celtics of 2008 and “UBUNTU”. This concept of “I am because we are” a theme adopted by head coach at the time Doc Rivers, is still said to have triggered the biggest turnaround in NBA history. He said “The problem with many superstar players is that the only thing bigger than their salary is their ego”. He derived the concept in order to forge a cohesive identity within a group of alpha males. ‘Ubuntu emphasizes the collective success of a group or society. You can only be the best version of yourself if you enable the people and community around you to be the best version of themselves’. After a 22 year drought, the Boston Celtics won their 17th NBA championship, just one year after one of the worst seasons in franchise history.

So is it just the theme or is it deeper? Owen Eastwoods novel *Belonging* studies further insights where he shines a light on where these powerful ideas are applied around our world in high performing settings encompassing sport, business, the arts and military. Owen Eastwood places this concept of the core of his methods to maximise a team's performance unifying and establishing a shared purpose. Belongingness, a fundamental human need, holds significant importance in the realms not just of club rugby, but all high performing

teams. Cultivating a sense of belonging within a rugby club goes beyond mere camaraderie; it nurtures a supportive environment where players feel valued, accepted, and connected. Sir Alf Ramsey (manager of the 1966 England World Cup winning football team) said “players don't remember what you say in team talks or practises- what they remember is how you made them feel”. Fostering a sense of belonging among club rugby players is not just about creating a ‘friendly’ atmosphere, it can be a catalyst for numerous positive outcomes. It can have an impact on mental health, motivation, performance, club culture, long-term player development, and even on a higher level greater connection to community. Clubs that prioritise and actively cultivate this sense of belonging create a nurturing environment where players thrive both on and off the field, fostering a deeper passion for the sport and a strong bond among club members. Ultimately, the cultivation of belongingness forms the backbone of a successful and sustainable rugby club.

So, if in fact if we are saying how important it is for athletes and individuals to feel valued and connected to their team and club, to create a high performing team, clubs and coaches should be looking at creating a high-performance environment. An environment in which builds resilience, understands there athletes/players, has a deep comprehension of the game, and playing for a higher purpose are key interconnected elements vital for success in rugby. They all have the ability to collectively shape a team's culture, resilience, performance, and impact, transcending the sport and hopefully leave a lasting legacy.

To then further build upon a clubs or teams purpose, a major contributing factor and foundational element for creating a high performing environment is that of having a vision and core values. We know that defining a clear vision and foundational values provides not only the team with a shared direction and principles to guide their actions and culture but the also the entire club and organisation. Having this direction can assist everything from sponsorships to game play, roles and responsibilities to recruitment and retention. One prime example of this is talent identification and recruitment. Many times I have heard “just go and get the best players”, one coach I will remain nameless said “the best players make the best coaches”. Undoubtably can, and has proven to lead to short term success, however as we have already discussed there’s talent and there is the creating the greatest sense of

team and belonging. Selecting players who not only possess talent but align with the team's vision and values is crucial for a cohesive and high-performing unit.

However driving these values with a deep understanding, living them, furthermore celebrating these values is where the mastery lies. How far and how powerful this can become is endless. Bringing people along for the journey can ultimately lead to playing for a higher purpose, can motivate entire communities, and as we have just seen at the 2023 Rugby World Cup inspire entire nations. How did South Africa find a way? How did they win there last three final games by a single point? The stronger emotional connection and support for the team playing for a greater cause again as the Boston Celtics, driven by a shared purpose, elevated their performance, and were motivated to exceed their own expectations for the collective benefit one of which was for an entire nation.

This then brings to the attention notions of building resilience in rugby players. Resilience has been defined as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” i.e. it means to ‘bounce back’ or rebound from adversity. However, a lot of people think of it only as the ability to recover from setbacks. It is said to be adaptive because it helps us become more productive and avoid maladaptive behaviours which inhibit and limit us. There is much more to resilience than just ‘getting back on the horse’. Resilience is also the ability to recover quickly from difficulties, take up new opportunities and move on i.e. you spring forward to accept new challenges. So what does this mean in Rugby?

Mindset training, embracing adversity, stress management, physical resilience, team support, coping with pressure, and continuous learning all contribute to building resilience. In everyday life, experts may rarely encounter the same challenges under similar conditions (Ericsson & Williams, 2007). So performance maybe because of the differences in types of challenges encountered on the training pitch rather than just in the ability and skill of the individual. Again, and continuing on with rugby specific drills and training, coaches these days are empowering their players with constant game like situations to enable their players to overcome any decisions they may have to make on any particular day. Rugby players will also have to face different opponents, with different strengths and weaknesses, which will in fact determine a different style that they may also have to play. So, although from a different

sport Kobe Bryant described modern coaches as teachers “Coaches are teachers. Some coaches lesser coaches they try ‘telling’ you things. Great coaches however teach you how to think and arm you with the fundamental tools necessary to execute properly. Simply put good coaches make sure you know how to understand the game. Good coaches tell you where the fish are great coaches teach you how to find them. That's the same at every level”.

Resilience, has many key ingredients such as emotional regulation, impulse control, empathy self-efficacy, reaching out, casual analysis, hope and optimism ‘a sense of belief’ (Australian sports commission). The Seahawks coached by Peter Carroll, explicitly anchor their culture in optimism. Dr Michael Gervais who was the High Performance Psychologist more fully defined optimism in this way “there is a belief that things are going to workout. Therefore, we can stay in the hard times longer. We know that there will be internal and external struggle on the way”. First, they start with the science. As we have previously discussed they identify core insights around human behaviour that they want to drive in the environment. Again reenforcing purpose values and identity. Second, the Seahawks developed an identity blueprint that brings these underlying principles to life. This includes an overarching philosophy, themes, standards and their style of play. Third, every single day, the Seahawks leaders design how to bring this cultural framework to life that day. As Michael Gervais puts it “our philosophy has to line up every day what is often noted by the outside world is the energy, noise and fun in the Seahawks 's environment. When reading this it made further sense to my visit to Ivan Cleary and the Penrith Panthers.

In my time as a professional player, coach and athlete I have never experienced the feeling of a greatest sense of connection and team like this. It was living proof that the Seahawks model works. The purpose of the visit was motivated by the success Penrith had in 2022 where they won all premierships across all ages in one season. 4 Titles which had never been done in the modern era. Was it just depth and talent what were they doing and what did it look like? Can this also be achieved in a ‘Village Club’? It was about the “Panther Pride”. Club members, community, players, strength coaches, skills coaches all having a clear understanding of what their club values “look like, feel like, act like”. As previously mentioned the mastery was in the delivery. It was brought to life through language, energy,

noise, clarity in detail, celebrations of moments both that encompass the on field and off and as they became known for their connection and togetherness. It has become a trait that no panther go by themselves. No player entered a team meeting, or team training session, until the last player was ready. There theme 'History Hunters' 'Undisputed champs'.

Understanding your rugby athletes is an ongoing process that requires active engagement, empathy, and a genuine interest in their development. By investing time and effort in understanding their personalities, motivations, and individual needs, coaches can build stronger relationships, tailor coaching approaches, and ultimately enhance the performance and well-being of their players. Gone are the days of the approach and the whole idea of 'checking your feelings at the door' and 'mental toughness' where pretending all emotions, social variables, cultural variables, personal histories and real life experiences do not exist once you walk in to a high pressure scenario, or on to the pitch, and concentrating purely on the results seems too simplistic. In any domain performance is a process. Again, sport psychology informs that all performance and behavior is a function of environment and person (Thorpe 2009).

If as coaches we derive a pathway that has strong team culture and environment: A positive and supportive team culture fosters unity, cooperation, and psychological safety we will have gone closer to understanding high performing teams and their environments. Surprisingly, all of this was common within all above examples before we even explore the tactical and physical preparation and Analysis of teams. Developing game plans and strategies tailored to strengths and opponents' weaknesses is crucial for on-field success make no mistake about it but as Theodore Roosevelt said "people don't care about what you know until they know how much you care".

To conclude, this essay provided overview of the essential psychological elements involved in rugby, highlighting their interdependence and the holistic approach required to excel in the sport. Through day to day delivery, coaches play the pivotal role in education driving and fostering purpose vision values and building resilience by modelling behaviours, providing support, and creating a supportive team environment. We have highlighted that embracing a higher purpose in rugby encourages all involved to see beyond individual achievements,

fostering a team-centric approach that can transcend the game itself creating a lasting legacy and a sense of fulfillment that goes beyond wins and losses, hopefully leaving a profound impact on players' lives and the sport of rugby as a whole.

How we assess, deliver, and train our players across all the particular attributes of performance are going to be continuously pursued and researched, but through experimental evidence and as we have shown that it is through repeated contextual and intentional practice of superior performance that rugby among most sporting and high stress domains provide a the training ground for finding answers to key questions surrounding “high performance” and there environments. Ultimately answering why I do what I do. Forever chasing the next complete performance. The win but more importantly a sense of belonging.

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