

'Talking Tactically'

with Lachlan Tighe.....

(a weekly edition, commenced 12/9/2001, of thoughts, observations and commentaries on developments for bowls coaching and competition)

"GREAT TEAMS: ATTITUDE COMMITMENT INVOLVEMENT"

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'Winning Gold: a measure of coaching performance')

CHAPTER TEN

GREAT TEAMS: ATTITUDE =COMMITMENT > INVOLVEMENT

Storytime

Late 2003, England won the Rugby Union world cup after 99 minutes 53 seconds of play. How they won was due to a continued belief in the approach they had invested in each and every one of their players on the field.

What we know is that the ball was flung out to Jonny Wilkinson as was the case the previous passage of play in the belief he would execute once again that kick that he trained to perform to score.

The result – England are an historical example of a great team. To be used by people like me to reinforce the message to readers like you.

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Malaysia's Gold medal singles champions, Siti Zalina Ahmed, is a great player.

Way back in November 2000 I had a unique opportunity to be on the selection panel to decide the winners of the Sport Australia Awards 2000 (our Olympic year) for best coach, best player, best team etc.

In the documents supporting each of the candidate nominations were statements of support, and with this plethora of information, I soaked up what I was to eventually use to decide the qualities of great players, great teams, great coaches.

I have devised a list of qualities to describe these qualities for great teams. You may have more, or less, as the reader – no matter – what is important is a recognition of the qualities that all great (champions) possess:

GREAT TEAMS': QUALITIES

A hobby horse of mine is knowing what constitutes a great team. Steve Waugh had a great (cricket) team

In bowls we join our equivalent (premier league) bowls club, if possible, to be a member of their premier division side, which is the preparatory league to the elite level.

This league should provide the same team competitive ethos for bowls that the individual finds when they are competing as elite bowlers at the national level. But, it does'nt.

Relate this to our premier bowls sides and the sixteen players in those sides.

I am constantly staggered by the degree of mediocrity prevailing in this the top level of our domestic sport, which is best indicated by the training sessions of top bowlers. Which is, literally, a continuation of what lower grade players do to prepare for their competition.

If we do not aspire to that cricket example approach, then the bowls club does not deserve to remain in premier league competition. And where do we go at elite national level !!!

As individual bowlers, there is no doubt you should not be considered for further elite level selection if that hunger and challenge to improve is not foremost in your attitude.

My eyes and ears tell me that many of my own bowls squad when away from my training scene revert back to what they knew before...comfort zone... there is our challenge in bowls standards for the future.

In summary a great team in my opinion does the following:

'Expects to win'.....because they know their preparation has been so thorough that their approach to the competition is superior to the opposition; and, they know their record and knowledge of the opposition, because, they keep statistical data to help that know how ;

'Has respect'...for one another as team mates who can be relied on in the heat of battle to support one another;

'Earns respect'...by the deeds in training and competition, and certainly in our sport, not by the words uttered at the club bar; if you are at the club bar you are not out training, and therefore, in my opinion, not a member of a great team;

'Is hard working'...and as such members train diligently so as to be full of excellent skills which is especially necessary in a side of 16 bowlers;

'Is challenged by experimenting to approaches for higher and better performance'...I cite Steve Waugh, the Australian cricket captain, saying they, as the world champion team, train as if they are second best in the world; if anything, all the bowlers I have ever laid eyes on do not adopt this facet of a great team as the training is so traditional, and thus it lacks any form of experimentation; and I put that issue down to a reluctance by good bowlers to accept the contemporary role of modern coaching that is seen in other sport;

'Focussed to set goals'...and again this is where our best bowlers have a lot to learn; setting and writing goals is foreign to them, and, the idea of reviews and evaluation of both training and competition is too hard; why ? probably because they cannot describe their thoughts in

writing, and because there is no personal coach to guide them; our bowls coaches have limited their own development by not pushing the boundaries;

‘Trust and Honest communication’...among the team members and for that matter the coach; never has it been said the individuals have to like one another; they have a common goal (philosophy) and they accept personal responsibility to make the team goal their outcome; that generally means win the championship

And I reckon great teams revolve around these four Ps (which I keep in the back of my head to assist my coaching)

Philosophy an agreed approach and values for the team/ side/ club

People the ‘right’ type of people that can fulfill the goal

Plans & programs relevant and stringent training and competition schedules to enable final success for that one game that ultimately counts

Performance competing, monitoring, evaluating, preparing and competing again

Therefore a list of qualities to define being ‘Great’ include

- ATTITUDE: practice the habits that succeed
- APPLICATION: of training habits in competition
- CHALLENGES: relishes and enjoys new challenges
- COMMITMENT: punctuality and reliability two factors
- DISCIPLINE: in training, competition
- EVALUATION: Reviews training and performance
- EXCELLENCE: in training, in all things, in all skills
- EXPECTATION: Expects to win
- EXPERIMENTS: Challenged by experimenting with approaches to high performance
- GAME PLANS: integral part of the preparation
- GOALS: Focused on set goals
- LEARNS: from win and losses
- LEADERSHIP: Strength and Honest communication
- POSITIVE: in approach
- RESPECT: Has respect for / from others

- THINKS: Hard & working
- TRAINS: diligently, hard
- TRUST; of/ in others, teammates

In his book, Orlick, in chapter 2, made reference to the fact that ‘...there are varying views in sport about the physical attributes necessary for excellence but almost total agreement on the psychological attributes..... commitment and self control are seen as the keys to excellence.....to excel you must be committed and have self control to perform well under various stress producing situations.....to be your best you must live this commitment, regularly stretch your perceived current limits.

Commitment alone does not guarantee success, but, a lack of commitment ensures you will fall short of potential success.

I wrote a coaching column for a website in 2002 that I titled ‘...No Limits’. This is the text of that column

‘Let me introduce you to what I think is the true element of excellence; read this precised article from sailing and then I’ll summarise my applications to bowls.

‘..against all the traditional lore of not taking risks early in a series, Arthur Brett went on to win the world championship with his worst placing a third and without having to start in the last race.

For Brett has with coach Lex Bertrand trained to a philosophy that there are no boundaries to what a sailor can accomplish.

People said he was obsessed and different. His training did not entail conventional training drills. He was constantly pushing the boundaries of what he was able to achieve.

People remarked that Brett appeared to struggle in training and he agreed. The main thing was that he was struggling with the ‘no limits’ philosophy and not with the standard tacking and gybing (in bowls read as getting the shot). The philosophy is his passion. The result does not matter so long as he performed to his maximum.

Bertrand noted that Brett did less formal training and more confrontation exercises making him more independent in the decision making in competition. He continued to say that Brett has changed his ideas on the whole scene of risk management and risk assessment (in competition)’.

Craig Fox, sports hypnotherapist, who works with my ‘Elbows’ bowls squad, spoke to them, and some other interested bowlers, with regard to the power of the mind (in sport) and amongst other things the challenge of change.

Bowlers and bowls coaches have a quantum leap to make to reach the ‘no limits’ mindset. Having watched a tournament final in Melbourne and other premier league bowlers practice this past week I am even more convinced of the hindrance facing us with the fixed mindsets held by good bowlers.

Change is not on their agenda.

However I noted with interest that a few of the extra attendees at the seminar were other premier league club representatives trying to gain insight in how to improve the performances of the good bowlers at their club. That change should lead to improvement.

Mind you, their initial discussion centred around player pennant score cards, players faltering under pressure in pennant and the paying of players and coaches.

I dismiss these as high priorities as the development of a culture of success in a bowls club is the first priority and these tools only support the culture. They are not the culture.

For me the answer for improved development is instilling a culture (via leadership) that embraces the attitude of practising successful habits.....moving to Lex Bertrand's stratospheric zone of 'NO LIMITS' .

I hope one day to meet you in Lex's zone'.

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How do others view the qualities of a great player in sport.

Take basketball and say Michael Jordan; '...the basketballers commitment reflected in the incredible intensity they bring to practice and competition.... when they train they are there for a reason to do their best and to accomplish their goals every second...

in competition they are supercharged and super focused nothing less than their best effort is enough (in Oz bowls beset by booze, smoking, food and diet)... great players make a commitment to do the work as a prerequisite to excellence but unless you master the art of self control you will continue to fall short of your dreams

excellence requires development of focussing skills as well as an openness to input from others

if you are serious about becoming the best you can be, the most essential ingredient is your commitment, attitude is all about practising habits

Sounds good !

What though are the guidelines to excellence. Well they probably include these:

- set specific daily goals to accomplish in training
- take set time to prepare mentally
- commit to quality training to execute skills
- train by simulating what occurs in competition
- practice imagery skills daily
- practice performance imagery to involve all your senses (ears, eyes, brain, touch)

- quality and control of imagery leads to a higher level of concentration and overall performance improvement
- rest well when preparing for important events
- listen to your body to avoid overtraining
- know what focus works well for you and follow in training and event simulations
- set and follow your pre event prep so as to be on autopilot for the game
- learn from the game: what went well / badly, make a note and work on them for you to be better prepared for the next challenge

Orlick (ch 14) in further explaining the notion of 'Great teams' said they had commitment, make commitment, meet commitment.

Why? Because the individual and the team strive for excellence. Excellence is reflected in persistence.

Part of the challenge of pursuing excellence is to be persistent. Great players know persistence means giving something enough time to work.

The other elite bowlers who squandered their chance to become the very best bowlers probably were the ones who said....I tried that and it did not work.

My retort to you reading this as an ambitious bowler headed toward elite level is to see these good bowlers who never make it as 'household' name status and then to question

How long do I persevere with the new skills

How long do I practice it

How fully and completely are you focussing on the skill

How did you record, compare, analyse the progress of the work

Did the coach monitor and analyse the skill development too

Did you give enough time to feel the progress

I reckon you lose a little to gain a lot long term. Experimentation and refinement are necessary for the progress you have set to achieve excellence; it can also be bloody good fun if coached well.

Goal setting may help you become more persistent. Persistence does not guarantee that you will achieve your ultimate goal in bowls, what it will do is guarantee development and growth along the journey.

TURKEYS & EAGLES

In April 2000 when I started up the bowls squad called 'Elbows' (Elite Lawn Bowls Squad) I used to utter two phrases which probably drove people to drink

- attitude is all about practising habits &
- if you want to soar with the Eagles don't mix with Turkeys.

These two phrases were embedded into my psyche from not only going to Malaysia but also in my approach to fostering a Culture of Excellence, commitment, within the bowls fraternity that I mixed with that year.

I laugh when the Malaysian squad told me that there was no need for a translation of that latter phrase as it also was stated in that same manner for Malaysians.

Without little fear of contradiction, I reckon the likes of Tony Allcock, and other bowls luminaries follow the same mindset – after all they are the best.

No doubt Lina, Malaysia's gold medallist and Chooie, Malaysia's female coach of the year were kindred spirits in 2002.

ATTITUDE

Terry Orlick's book 'In Pursuit of Excellence' is a book to read to discover more insight into attitude. Plough through my experiences to see how a layman has tried to ply his craft as a coach with attitude.

Attitude is all about practising habits. That theme has been my theme song since I established the squad 'Elbows' in April 2000 as a squad of elite bowlers.

I ventured forward in the belief that mental skills required for eXcellence were developed before game day through relevant quality game oriented practice. What did Steve Waugh say...Australian cricketers practice as if they were only second best in the world...Now that is hunger !!!

As a follower of their approach in cricket, I firmly apply the principle of reacting to repeated errors in bowls training.

My observation since I took up bowls in 1986 was that even good bowlers practised the art of sub standard deliveries because they left these poor deliveries to rest.

For me constructive reaction to errors is a learned process.

I did, or importantly I coach, two things to overcome the error and improve the training. Firstly any delivered poor bowl falling short of the target / jack by excess of a metre or MAT LENGTH had to be retrieved by the player and re delivered until it met the accepted zone.

Second in other drills if the player repeated an error (it occurred twice) there had to be a personal 'red alert' system in place for them so as to avoid further repetition of that error. And this red alert system had to be described by the player for it was important for the player to know it, apply, and use it in competition.

The Malaysian team had no choice in my next approach, though I wish more elite level bowlers and coaches too would subscribe to this area – post training and post game analysis.

Great teams, great players mentally and verbally replay their games with the coaches after the event. Key times and decisions in the game are noted, discussed and where loss or failure occurred lessons derived from the experience.

Discontent, rage, anger, frustration all may be valid emotional reactions to losses however these players of great stature move on, gaining value from the lessons learnt as they scale the peaks for greater glory.

The next time at training something is not happening for quality performance, use that as a signal to focus on what can enhance the level of performance. Learn to focus on the next delivery not the poor one just past. Where there is a break of time between deliveries in training or where in singles you can practice walking to the head after the third bowls, use that time to practice mental skill analysis reasons for good or poor execution, refocus on the image, the feel and the sense of the excellent performance.

As an elite bowler you may have excellent technical skills but never perform to your potential unless you identify, train, and gain control of your mental state and the skills that provide that degree for excellence, that mental strength.

Mental skills embrace emotions and mood control. That means being in control, not upsetting yourself.

At the Games 2002 the Malaysians were preoccupied with the suitable 'friendly' food availability.

The Australians got caught up with the wet and cold playing conditions. Lets be fair, 23 countries with 14 players each faced the same conditions in Manchester.

Winners at any international (or any other event) are those who did not allow the food, accommodation, village, noise, venue conditions etc to get out of control for them emotionally.

They had attitude – they practised habits of performance preparation they had control over, no more than that.

Attitude is reflected by you, the bowler, to me as a coach in your practising habits. Not perfect habits of practice, just simply the approach and habits you display for me to observe and then assess your attitude.

Since April 2000 when I formally started my personal approach to coaching with the formation of the 'ELBOWS' squad, continuing that mindset in Malaysia and later in Australia, I have adopted and applied the phrase 'attitude: all about practising habits'. Not practising perfect habits, simply practising habits. I wanted players and coaches to acknowledge that results and outcomes are a result of the attitude you take to the process, the goal, the objective. A level lower than perfect will still reflect your attitude

Summarising it simply with these points as I see it applying to us in bowls and most certainly to the coaches of the future (bowlers)

- Every member of a team should know the results they must achieve, the team objective
- Set clear directions for you and the team

- Demand and deliver high performance
- Keep everyone frequently informed of the team goals
- Be clear about the standards you set and monitor
- Allow each player to determine the best way of achieving the desired result
- Poor performance, especially in training, should be tackled as soon as it appears you need to re-emphasise improving performance
- Celebrate success, learn...from losses and mistakes
- Feedback is vital, and needs to be honest, timely, sensitive , measurable where practicable, and valuable to both players and coaches
- Don't praise unnecessarily it sounds hollow
- Embrace change, be innovative, out think the opposition , train the players to think
- Without change, we fall off the pace, lose more than we win and end up relegated or deem to be regarded as losers
- Learn from your experiences and those others who are highly skilled performers to improve performance in competition and training
- As a coach create the environment to allow for innovation and encourage others to share and experiment
- Be prepared to borrow from others, find out why others are successful, build up those contacts, encourage team and squad members to do the same, have a short cut to the best practices in bowls
- If you have a problem as a player or as a coach find out if someone else has solved it before wasting your own time on solutions
- Allow players to learn from you as the coach– share your learning with others
- In out thinking the opposition (in bowls) understand your team / players, know the opposition, embrace the team to be able to counter opponents in the 'heat of battle'
- Play and train with total determination, demand and reward perseverance as the coach
- Remain with your plan even when opposition is intense
- Be flexible in overcoming the opposition without having to alter the overall plan and goal
- As a player with a dream and a goal, don't allow other players to persuade you to accept compromise when it is not necessary, set standards and challenge bowlers to pursue them

- Risk taking is to be encouraged and applied in training so long as the taking of risks is not used as an excuse for poor performance
- In a strong level of competitive sport (bowls) you can do your best and still not do well enough (to win)
- Understand your opposition, identify the games you want to win and win them; so a bit like losing the battle but won the war

(each of these points would be a feature of the approach and process we strive to deliver and achieve within the 'elbows' squad)

Australia's post war prime minister was Ben Chifley, PM 1945-1949. He was quoted as saying '...If an idea is worth fighting for, no matter the penalty, fight for the right, and truth and justice will prevail.' I hope you look at your coaching and playing similarly.

ATTITUDE: ALL ABOUT PRACTISING HABITS