

Beginning With the Ashes in Mind



In the summer of 2005, the England Cricket Team regained the Ashes by beating Australia in a five match series, which has been described by many experts as the greatest series of all time. The ebbs and flows of each game were captivating, even to the non-cricket follower. The margins of victory were invariably desperately small. The pressure was immense throughout. Mental toughness played a crucial role from the opening minutes of the first day at Lords to the final climax at The Oval on 12 September. Going into this fifth match, England were winning 2–1 and needed at least a draw to regain the trophy that had eluded them for the previous 18 years. In his weekly column preceding the start of the match, *Sunday Telegraph* cricket correspondent Scyld Berry wrote:

The Fifth Test starting at the Oval on Thursday can absorb any superlative you care to throw at it. The biggest sporting occasion in Britain since 1966; the most important cricket match ever played in England, and the most significant anywhere if it ends up ending the Australian empire; and the climax of the most exciting Test series of all time.¹

**Scyld Berry, *Sunday Telegraph*
cricket correspondent**

So, under these extreme conditions, how were the players feeling going into this match? How did they prepare? How confident were they? How did they manage to stay focused on the right things? How did they deal with the pressure of expectation from the media and the public – not to mention that which they were placing on themselves? If you were advising those players in the lead up to the game, what would you have said? It's too easy to simply say 'be positive – have confidence'. As Simon Barnes once wrote in his piece in *The Times*:

*Confidence is a bar of soap in the power shower of the sporting life. Grasp it too tight and it squirts from your hands; reach to pick it up again and you are flat on your back.*²

Simon Barnes, *The Times*

We know that under pressure people can sometimes find a few extra percent and perform above their natural levels. Equally, and perhaps more commonly, some individuals simply fall apart when the pressure is on and experience the dreaded 'choke' – a word that is banned from being uttered in many sporting locker rooms for fear of the psychological impact merely thinking about it can have. The England Cricket Team had been accused of choking many times in previous years but something was different about the 2005 team. They demonstrated a degree of mental toughness and resilience which had been absent in the past. Their 'attitude' was different and as Jonny Wilkinson once said:

That sort of attitude training, mental toughness if you like, can be the difference between winning and losing. What you want to develop is the kind of mentality that says, in the last five minutes of a game when the score is tied, 'Give me the ball' rather than 'I wish this was all over, I can't do any more'. Winners and losers are made right there.³

**Jonny Wilkinson, member of 2003 World Cup
winning England rugby team**

This new found 'attitude' demonstrated by these England cricketers did not, however, suddenly emerge at the start of the summer in 2005. As the old cliché goes ... it takes five years to create an overnight sensation. Performances on the field during the summer of 2005 had been the result of years of hard work and quality preparation which had begun when Nasser Hussain took over the captaincy in 1999 and set about creating a different kind of 'environment'. When Michael Vaughan was appointed captain in 2003, he continued to raise the bar until eventually England were in a position to present a realistic challenge to the Australian team which had occupied a pre-eminent position in world cricket for more than a decade.

In short, in 2005 England had a 'game plan' and each individual player going into that famous deciding match at the Oval knew exactly what he needed to focus on in order to maximize his personal contribution to the team effort. They were not going to get carried away with the enormity of the occasion because they would be focusing on their own individual 'performance processes' over which they could exert personal control. They

would be totally prepared for all eventualities and feel absolute confidence in the knowledge that they had not left any stone unturned. They had established a 'framework' for success which, although not guaranteeing victory, would certainly give them the best possible chance. And as Andrew Flintoff said at the conclusion of the series:

They say that victory goes to the side that wants it more. That's an old cliché and it's not true. Victory goes to the side that prepares the best.⁴

Andrew Flintoff, England cricket all rounder

This book is about winning – but not on the sports field. It's about winning in business. It's about 'you' winning in business. It's about 'your' personal performance in business. It's about how you can create a 'personal performance environment' that enables you to deliver at the crucial times. The book will help you create a 'game plan' which will give you the type of mental toughness required to be a high performer in the ever more pressurized world of corporate life in the 21st century. This is a world which is demanding, dynamic and driven. Mental toughness is essential if you are to 'thrive' rather than simply 'survive' in a culture which increasingly expects you to deliver more whilst spending less. The book will explore different types of mental toughness and examine how knowledge of each can give you the platform for significantly increased levels of self-confidence and resilience. Whatever your position or role in a company, there will be tips and advice in the book for you. The approaches I shall outline are those that I have found to be most successful in my business consultancy working with individuals ranging across the company spectrum from CEOs to new recruits. The content of the book is based around a model of mental toughness which I developed out of a piece of

mental toughness research I conducted in my role as England Cricket Team Psychologist. As well as working directly with the England Team itself, this role has also involved running the Leadership strand of the England and Wales Cricket Board's Elite Coaches' Development Programme and has thus given me the opportunity to work closely with a wide range of high quality coaches as well as international players.

In 1996, I wrote a book called *The Mental Game: Getting Psyched for Sport*, which provides the reader with a user-friendly guide to using mental skills in competitive sport. In the opening pages of that book, I asked the question, 'What is this thing we call mental toughness?' and proceeded to outline a number of attributes demonstrated by tough performers such as high self-belief, staying positive in the face of pressure and having an extremely strong desire to succeed. Two years later I was working with the England Cricket Team during a summer in which they were playing against South Africa. England had not won a major Test series for over a decade and were 0–1 down in the series with two matches to play. The fourth match was played at Trent Bridge and it provided one of the most memorable periods of fierce competition between two players – Michael Atherton (who was batting) and Allan Donald (who was bowling). It was an awesome spectacle to watch as Donald peppered Atherton with a series of extremely fast and hostile deliveries. As the episode unfolded, spectators became aware that this personal battle would probably decide the entire five-match series. If Donald got Atherton out, South Africa would most likely win the game and hence the series 2–0 with a match still to play. If Atherton could hang on, and fend off Donald's attack, England could win the match, level the series, and go to Headingley with a chance of sneaking an unlikely series win. The critical period of play lasted just under an hour. Atherton managed to hang on, see Donald off, and England won the

match. They went to Headingley and won there too, claiming an unlikely series victory which is still remembered for that 60 minute hostile and aggressive interchange displayed at Trent Bridge. Some time after the series, I was still, as a psychologist, fascinated to reflect on Atherton's performance and arranged to interview him at length about how he coped with the demands and pressure of the situation. That conversation sparked an interest in researching the area of mental toughness generally in cricket. I was becoming increasingly frustrated with supposed experts who were liberally using the term to label players without actually understanding what it was and how it could be developed. I wanted to understand mental toughness from the perspective of those who had 'been there and done it' in order to ascertain what we could learn to help our younger players be 'fast tracked' to a position of superior mental resilience. At the same time, I was very encouraged to hear from Atherton that although he felt some people were naturally tougher than others, it was a skill that could be worked on and improved.

I think some people have natural mental toughness and some people don't but I do think that it can be acquired and you can work to get better at it.⁵
Michael Atherton,
former England cricket captain

I proceeded to survey over 100 cricket coaches asking them who they thought the toughest England players of the 80s and 90s were and then simply compiled a ranking list to identify the most appropriate players to approach. Knowing most of them personally, I was then able to conduct an in-depth interview with 12 of the top 15 ranked players. The list was a veritable 'who's who' of English cricket and included Graham Gooch, Mike Gatting, Nasser Hussain, Darren Gough, Alec Stewart and of course Michael Atherton himself (who was incidentally ranked No. 1 by a considerable margin!).

The results of this study were published in the national press but in the course of conducting the interviews and analysing all the data, I began to formulate a model that had wider ranging implications beyond cricket. It appeared that mental toughness was not as straightforward as many people would think and could even be categorized into different types requiring different 'mindsets' for different situations. The model that emerged appeared easily applicable to other sports. I began reflecting on the experience I have had of working at three Olympic Games as Great Britain Headquarters Psychologist. During these events, I had observed how athletes, and indeed team managers, coped with the multi-faceted pressures which are so evident in the Olympic environment. I had seen mental toughness at its best and at its worst. I began reviewing all I had learned over the previous 20 years working in elite sport. During that time, in addition to my work in cricket, I had consulted with performers from the professional tennis circuit, the European PGA golf tour, both the English Soccer and Rugby Union Premierhips, professional motor sport, the British Ski Team, the British Equestrian Team, the British Track and Field Team and many others.

Pulling all this material together, I then set about creating a model that would add value to my executive coaching in the corporate world. I tested the model with many individuals across a wide range of very different blue chip organizations in both the UK and the United States. Although the corporate context varies enormously between these companies, the challenges facing individuals seem to me to be remarkably similar. People are challenged with working long hours, have to perform under extreme pressure much of the time and must deal with constant change, adversity and setbacks. Confidence, clear thinking and resilience are prerequisites for success and will discriminate between winning and losing in the same way

that they will in sport. It is my observation that many people in corporate life do not fully appreciate that they are 'performing' and hence would benefit from a 'performance mindset' in dealing with their job demands. Consider the following situations that people encounter during their day-to-day business life:

- conducting a one-to-one performance appraisal,
- making a presentation to the board,
- meeting a new client in a situation where it is crucial that a good impression is made,
- getting through a hectic 12 hour day which includes travel, several meetings, a working lunch and report writing,
- running a team meeting,
- presenting a monthly progress report to colleagues.

This list could go on and on but my point is that these challenges are 'performances'. Not in the sense of a Shakespearian play but in the sense of an athletic performance. They require focus, confidence, resilience, quick thinking and the ability to deal with distractions and pressure. In other words, they require 'mental toughness'. This being the case a great deal can be learned from the attributes and behaviours of the elite, mentally tough, sports performer.

In summary, the notion of the 'corporate athlete' as originally described by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz several years ago, is resonating more and more with the business clients I come across these days. Individuals need a 'game plan' to help them prepare for, cope with, and learn from, the pressures they are facing in everyday corporate life. This book presents a framework for that 'game plan'. I hope you enjoy it and I'm confident that if you apply the principles and techniques outlined you will significantly increase your prospects of winning in business by developing your mental toughness.