



THE LESSONS OF EXCELLENCE IN SPORT

George Best, Bobby Charlton, Eric Cantona, Ryan Giggs, Roy Keane, David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney...

No - don't worry, I'm not suggesting that these are all great public speakers! However they have all proven themselves to be some of the most skilful footballers of recent times.

You'll guess from my choices that I am a fervent Manchester United fan, (my first memory of a football match was the 1968 European Cup Final against Benfica) and I have stayed loyal throughout Liverpool's dominance of the 70s and 80's, and even during United's relegation to the second division in 1974. Thankfully the last couple of decades have been magnificent times, and there is little doubt that Sir Alex Ferguson has proven himself to be the master of reinvention and rejuvenation. He has an uncanny ability to inspire an ethos of supreme effort and confident creativity in his players, which surely is the cornerstone of any successful individual or organisation.

I'm also a Dublin GAA football fan, which sadly doesn't bring as many glory days, but nevertheless they are my team and it is this diversity of fortunes that makes me wonder why so many of us cheer and sing when following our often low achieving teams into battle. If only our customers, clients, colleagues and students remained so loyal to us, and to our products, message, ethos and ideas. What is it that makes people follow you, even if you are 'playing' for an unfashionable team? What can we learn from these athletes that will motivate and inspire us to improve our skills and receive recognition for our efforts?

Well actually, quite a lot. The lessons of great sportspeople and becoming a supreme communicator are more closely linked than you think:

1. Great Footballers warm up and practise tirelessly before every match. No matter how excellent they are, and no matter how many years they have been playing. They make sure that they are ready. How often do you warm up your voice, or rehearse your sales pitch, presentation or speech to make sure that you perform at your best when it matters most? How else would you familiarise yourself with the physical and vocal demands of a job? Surely you're not going to leave things to chance again!

2. Every great Footballer once played in junior leagues, local competitions and academy teams before making it to the topflight. They worked hard, showed dedication and got noticed. They continuously improved their skills, raising the bar with every achievement, and hoping that someone would recognise their talent and take them to the next level. Are you one of those people that says I will do the work on myself when I need to, or are you constantly upgrading your skills so that you can grow and excel when opportunities arise?

3. Great Footballers have bad days. They miss penalties, they score own goals, they make foolish tackles, they get injured. And when these things happen, you almost always hear them say that they want to get back to playing again. It makes them mentally stronger, more resourceful and more experienced when facing the same situation again. Do you allow setbacks to completely stop you from even starting something. There is no better story than the one based on overcoming adversity and showing others that 'experiences' will ultimately make you better at what you do. Leadership is all about turning fear, embarrassment and rejection into opportunities for improvement.

4. A football team is made up of skilled individuals who can only succeed if they play as a team. If you don't have the skills, you are less likely to be asked to play for the best teams. Fact!

5. Every great Footballer was once a beginner. They probably tried many different activities, but realised that this was the one thing that made them happiest. How many new things do you try out? How can you become better at what makes you happiest?

6. Even great Footballers need a break or a change of routine. In recent times Footballers have turned to Ballet, Yoga, and Pilates to increase their flexibility, durability and to get other points of view on maintaining peak condition. Studying historical war strategies, mental games and sports psychology are tried and tested ways to stimulate and activate the athlete's brain towards a successful mindset. Often a team Manager will give players a week off to allow them to re-charge and switch off. We know from research that we recognise and feel safe with similarities, but we learn most from differences. Why not take a different approach, be creative and find the most unusual success story and take lessons in a new skill to enhance your existing ones.

7. Great Footballers get dropped from the team if they let their standards drop. No one is irreplaceable, and there are always others who will happily take the opportunity to shine and show the skills that they have been developing whilst waiting in the wings. There is nothing worse than a stagnant, closed minded middle to senior manager who rests on his / her laurels. Openly showing others that you are taking steps to improve is a trait of great leadership, and allows those around you to be more confident about expressing their weaknesses and strengths.

8. All great Footballers have mentors and coaches. They thrive on being stretched, given new challenges and receiving an expert's insight on their performance. How often have you asked an expert for feedback, guidance or coaching? You may be a beginner or you may be at the height of your profession, but don't you want to optimise the number of times that you have successes? It's reassuring to know what is working well for you, and even more reassuring to find out how you can improve on the rest.

So, the next time you follow your team, look around at all the others giving their wholehearted support. Notice why they are cheering, what gets them excited, and how they express their disappointments and joys. Then look on the pitch and see which one of those players epitomises your individual skill level, your desire, your ambition, your intelligence, your team abilities and your enjoyment of the game.

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We can't all be on the greatest team, but if you become the greatest that you can be, you will be happier and you will be able to influence those around you, AND those on the touchline, with your energy, enthusiasm and skills.

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