

11 The Groundsman Who Kept Going

Career development conversations in most organisations focus on what opportunities to pursue and what capabilities to build. Far less attention goes to the quality of engagement someone brings to the work already available to them. And yet the evidence from sport and from organisational research is consistent: the most consequential development rarely happens in the moments of obvious opportunity. It happens in the sustained, often unremarkable work that precedes them.

This matters for how organisations think about talent, and for how individuals think about their own development. The instinct is to treat the current role as a placeholder and the next one as the real opportunity, to save full commitment for the moment when the stage is large enough to justify it. What this instinct produces is a pattern of partial engagement that, over time, limits the depth of capability that genuine opportunity, when it finally arrives, requires. The people who take significant opportunities well are almost always those who developed the relevant capacities during the periods when no one was watching and nothing was at stake.

Nathan Lyon's path to becoming one of the most successful spin bowlers in the history of Australian cricket illustrates this with unusual precision and offers something directly applicable to how leaders think about their own development and the development of the people around them.

The Adelaide Oval, Before Anyone Was Watching

Before Nathan Lyon took his first Test wicket, before he became one of the most successful spin bowlers in the history of Australian cricket, before he passed five hundred Test wickets and took his place among the great off-spinners the game has produced, he was a groundsman. He turned up early at the Adelaide Oval, prepared wickets, mowed outfielders,