

CHRIS SHEPPARDSON • IZZY McHATTIE



ELITE & SPORT LEADERSHIP

MINDSET, CULTURE, AND
SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE



Elite Sport and Leadership: Mindset, Culture, and Sustainable Performance

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Prologue

Sport has always been about more than sport. While medals, trophies and league tables often dominate the conversation, the real value of sport sits elsewhere. It sits in the lessons learned when things do not go to plan. In the early mornings, difficult conversations, setbacks, missed opportunities and moments when resilience becomes a choice rather than a personality trait.

Whether through school teams, grassroots clubs, weekend competitions or elite environments, sport has long acted as one of society's greatest development tools. It creates spaces where people learn to communicate, collaborate and compete. It teaches individuals how to win with humility and lose with perspective. It provides opportunities to take responsibility, develop confidence and understand that progress rarely happens in a straight line.

Sport also creates discomfort. Pressure, uncertainty and failure are built into the experience. Missing selection, losing finals, making mistakes in front of teammates or recovering from poor performances all become lessons in emotional resilience. These moments are often difficult at the time, but they develop characteristics that become increasingly valuable far beyond the field of play.

Many of the qualities that organisations consistently look for are developed naturally through sporting environments. Adaptability. Discipline. Accountability. Communication. The ability to work with people who think differently. The confidence to speak up. Self-awareness when things are not working. Yet increasingly, these qualities cannot simply be assumed.

Today's emerging talent is entering a world that is changing rapidly. Careers are less linear, expectations are evolving and many people are navigating increasing levels of uncertainty and social pressure. Technical skills remain important, but technical skills alone are no longer enough. Organisations need people who can think critically, build relationships, navigate setbacks and continue learning throughout their careers.

This is where development matters. And this is where sport, examined honestly and closely, has something important to teach.

The pages that follow are not a book for sports fans. They are a book for anyone who leads, develops or works alongside other people. Sport provides one lens through which we can understand performance, culture and character – not because everyone needs to become an athlete, but because the principles that sport reveals remain relevant long after the final whistle.

The patterns explored in this book are drawn from the elite sporting environment, but they are not confined to it. They appear wherever performance matters, wherever pressure tests character, wherever teams either rise together or quietly come apart.

Character is not developed in comfort. It is developed through challenge, reflection and experience. Sport simply reminds us of that earlier than most.

About the Authors

Chris Sheppardson is the founder of EP Business in Hospitality and Chess Executive, and more recently of The Leader's Journey and Courageous Minds. A sociology graduate (BA Hons) of Bedford College, University of London, he has spent his career working alongside leaders across hospitality and business, building networks and communities dedicated to sharing what genuinely good leadership looks like in practice.



Izzy McHattie is a Director at The Ripple Effect, The Leader's Journey and Courageous Minds. An international athlete who has represented Scotland in the javelin, she writes about performance, pressure and the psychology of competition from first-hand experience. She holds an honours degree in Criminology from the University of Liverpool and spent three years with EP Business in Hospitality before taking up her current roles.



Courageous Minds, which she helps lead, focuses on developing mindset, drawing on real experiences from sport and business to build the frameworks and resilience of mind needed to thrive: the same territory this book explores.

*This book is dedicated to David, with thanks
for being a great father and a loyal friend.*

Introduction

There is something about sport that makes performance easier to see. Not because it is simpler, but because it is clearer.

Performance is easy to observe in sport. The score is visible. The outcome is immediate. The margin between success and failure can be measured in fractions of a second. What is much harder to observe in sport and in every other environment where performance matters is where the result actually comes from.

We tend to look at the visible moment. The final. The winning play. The collapse. The comeback. We search for explanations that sit close to the outcome, because those are the explanations we can see. But elite sport, when examined carefully and honestly, tells a consistently different story. The moment we watch is rarely where performance begins. It is where performance arrives built on things that happened months or years before anyone was paying attention.

That is the conviction at the heart of this book. And sport is the lens through which it is examined not because sport is more important than the environments most readers inhabit, but because sport makes the patterns clearer. The feedback loops are compressed. Cause and effect sit close together. What works and what does not becomes visible quickly, and under pressure that cannot be manufactured or softened.

When looked at with that in mind, sport becomes something more than entertainment or competition. It becomes a way of seeing how performance is actually built, maintained and sometimes quietly lost.

The Visible and the Hidden

In most environments, performance is hard to track. Outcomes are spread over time. Decisions are layered. Results are influenced by things that are not always visible in the moment. It becomes easy to focus on what just happened rather than on what led to it. Sport does not allow that same distance. A race is won or lost. A shot goes in or it does not. A team performs or it falls short. The feedback is immediate, and because of that, the patterns underneath performance are easier to notice.

Yet even in sport, those patterns are often misunderstood. We focus on the dramatic moment the penalty, the final push, the error under pressure and we search for explanations that sit right beside the outcome. But when athletes and coaches speak honestly about performance, they rarely describe it that way.

They talk about preparation that happened months or years earlier. They talk about environments that made certain behaviours more likely. They talk about habits that formed quietly over time and decisions that shaped the conditions long before the result appeared. The moment still matters. But it is rarely where performance begins.

"Performance is not created in the moment it is judged. It is revealed there."

That distinction matters. Because if performance is revealed in the moment rather than created in it, then the most important question is not what happened under pressure. It is what was already in place before the pressure arrived.

What This Book Is About

This book is organised around three questions. Each of them matters in its own right. Together, they form a single argument about how performance really works.

The first is about the **individual**. How people think, focus and respond when something genuinely important is on the line. Elite performers are not simply more talented or more disciplined than those around them. They have developed specific habits of mind, of attention, of preparation, of recovery that make consistent delivery under pressure possible. Some of these habits are counterintuitive. The 'Quiet Eye', for instance, shows that the best performers under pressure do not take in more information before acting. They narrow their attention to less, and hold it there for longer. That simple inversion runs against almost every instinct that a high-stakes moment produces. Understanding why it works, and how it can be built deliberately, is one of the threads running through the first part of this book.

The second is about the **environment**. How culture, structure and preparation quietly shape what individuals are able to do. The England football team that underperformed for decades and the England women's rugby team that became world champions operated in environments that produced very different outcomes

not primarily because of the talent available to them, but because of the structural conditions within which that talent was or was not developed. The chapters in the second part of this book explore how the environment around performers shapes what becomes possible, often in ways that are invisible until examined closely.

The third is about **time**. How performance is built over the long game, and what happens when the long game is not played. The most consequential decisions in any high-performance environment are rarely the visible ones. They are the structural choices made years earlier, when the return was uncertain and the cost was real. These earlier, less visible choices are the ones that most determine what is available when the pressure finally arrives.

The Argument

The argument is not complicated, but it runs against a powerful habit of mind. We are drawn to the visible. We evaluate performance in the moment we can see it. We invest in short-term interventions and defer structural ones. We focus on the result and underinvest in the conditions that produced it.

In sport, this pattern has consequences that are immediate and measurable. A bobsled race decided in the opening push. A penalty shootout shaped before the run-up begins. A season determined by a training environment built three years earlier. In each case the visible moment carries the weight of everything that preceded it and the athletes and coaches who understand this are the ones who sustain performance over time rather than achieving it occasionally.

The same principle applies in leadership, in organisations, in teams. The conversations that do not land as intended. The cultures that produce disengagement rather than commitment. The strategies that are well conceived and poorly executed. In almost every case, looking only at the visible moment misses the most useful part of the answer. The question this book returns to, chapter by chapter, is the harder and more productive one: what was already in place before the moment arrived?

Why This Matters Now

This book does not exist in a vacuum. It is written at a moment when the performance challenge facing organisations is unusually acute and when the tools available to address it are, paradoxically, well understood but consistently underused.

Investment in learning and development has fallen by fifty percent over the last fifteen years. Employee disengagement and declining productivity have been documented across industries. The fear of failure has become a genuine barrier to risk-taking, innovation and the kind of entrepreneurial behaviour that organisations publicly value but structurally discourage. Business has tilted towards short-cycle accountability and the management of risk and in doing so has made it harder for the people within it to develop the qualities that sustained performance actually requires.

Sport faced versions of these same problems and, in many cases, solved them first. The transformation of British Olympic performance following sustained structural investment. The cultural shift in the England football team under Gareth Southgate that produced a World Cup semi-final and a European Championship final within three years not through a change in talent, but through a change in environment. The Red Roses programme that created world champions not by finding better players but by building the structural conditions in which far more talent could develop to a far higher standard.

These are not simply sporting stories. They are case studies in what becomes possible when the principles this book examines are applied deliberately and over time. The world that most readers inhabit is not sport. But the patterns are not different. They are simply harder to see and therefore easier to overlook, to defer and to manage around rather than to address.

How to Read This Book

The chapters are designed to stand alone as well as to form a whole. Each one explores a specific dimension of performance through stories from sport, then traces what those stories reveal into the domains that matter to the people reading them. You do not need to read the book from beginning to end, though the argument accumulates if you do. What the book asks of you, in whatever order you

encounter it, is genuine engagement: not passive absorption, but active attention to where these ideas touch your own experience.

The bibliographies at the end of each chapter reflect the research base that underpins the argument being made. They are offered to anyone who wants to go further to examine the evidence more closely, to question the claims, to build on them. Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging where the evidence is strong and where it is thinner, and the chapters attempt to do that rather than presenting every claim with equal certainty.

There is no single model here. No framework that, once adopted, resolves the complexity of leading people and organisations through real challenges. What the book offers is something more durable: a way of seeing. Once you start to notice where outcomes are shaped before they are visible, where environments produce the performances that appear within them, where the long game is or is not being played those patterns tend not to disappear. They appear in how teams operate, in how decisions are made, in how people respond when things become uncertain.

A Note on the Stories

The stories in this book come from different sports, different levels of competition and different contexts. Some are well known. Others are quieter. None of them are presented as perfect examples or definitive answers. They are used because they illuminate something worth examining, and because the patterns they reveal are, on careful inspection, more widely applicable than the sporting context in which they appear.

The book also draws on conversations with people who have inhabited both worlds who competed or coached at the highest level of sport and then led in business or other high-performance environments. Their accounts add something that research and observation alone cannot produce: the experience of someone who lived inside these environments, who felt what they produced, and who draws connections not from the outside looking in, but from within. The lived version of a principle is always more convincing than the described one.

What you will not find here is easy reassurance. The argument this book makes is demanding: that the most consequential work in any performance environment happens before anyone is watching, in conditions of uncertainty, at a cost that is

immediately visible and a return that is not. That the habits of attention, of leadership, of investment in people that produce consistent performance over time are harder to build than they are to describe and that most environments are not currently building them as deliberately as they could be.

Sport does not flatter. That is, in the end, what makes it so useful. The score does not negotiate. The performance is what it is. And the patterns underneath it, once you start to see them, are ones that apply wherever performance matters and wherever the gap between what is possible and what is currently being achieved is worth closing.

Because the aim of this book is not to explain performance.

It is to help you recognise it.