

Putting the person before the performance.

An interview with John Harbin, fitness coach and sports psychologist, by Peter Jackson.

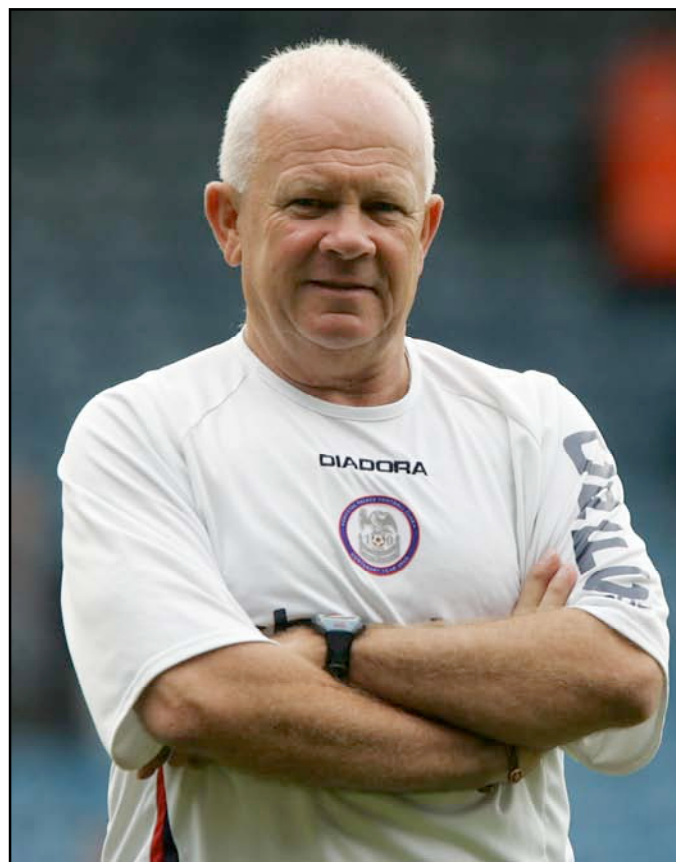
Millenium Stadium, Cardiff. May 29th 2004. It's about 5.0 on a sunny afternoon. 30,000 people in the red and blue half of the stadium are singing "Glad all over" – something of an anthem for Crystal Palace fans. On the pitch Palace players and management celebrate promotion to the Premiership after a single goal gives them victory over West Ham. Among them is John Harbin, an Australian rugby league coach, who has been on the Palace staff for less than five months. Iain Dowie had been appointed Palace manager in December after Palace had dropped into the bottom three of the First Division and were staring relegation in the face. Harbin had followed Dowie from Oldham in January.

It's a traditional Christmas pastime for the manager of a struggling football club to say, "let's see how the table looks in May". Not many seriously expect to go from the relegation zone to the play-off final. I wondered if there was something I could learn here.

Football's a tough game and big business. And I don't suppose the Australian rugby league scene is for society's more sensitive souls. But Harbin is a rather gentle, softly spoken man with strong values and an abiding philosophy: it all comes down to love and integrity.

"In rugby league," Harbin tells me, "you succeed or fail as a group and one thing I know is that if you love the people you work with, you play with, you live with, you'll achieve more. The ruthless businessmen will laugh at what I say, but the bottom line is the only people you'll die for are your family, so I think love is the greatest motivator in the world."

Perhaps we feel more comfortable talking about Rogerian unconditional positive regard, but put the way Harbin puts it, it does seem refreshingly simple. How does that work in a highly performance-led environment like football? "We



treat the player firstly as a human being and secondly as a footballer. And that's absolutely vital," says Harbin.

The bottom line counts like it does anywhere else, and the management need to be clear about what's required to do the job. The criticism, though, is very definitely about the performance not the person:

"Honesty at times hurts. But they'll get over that. You can say to a player, 'I'm dropping you this week, because of this part of your game, but I'm willing to spend time with you to help you improve it.' The player will be very disgruntled overnight but they'll accept what you've done."

Yet I can't believe that a team made up of experienced professionals suddenly developed a level of skill that accounts for the difference between

Continued on page 9

Continued from page 8

relegation and promotion. I remind Harbin of some of Palace's performances in the Premiership the following season: holding the far superior Arsenal team to a draw, in particular. How does that happen?

"It's the intangibles: commitment, desire, hunger, dedication, unselfishness. A team, group or organisation which is overloaded with the intangibles can often outperform a team with more ability. History's full of sporting teams that have pulled off upsets because they've been loaded up with the intangibles."

How do you load up those intangibles? Harbin is a great believer in leading by example:

"I guess it's your own attitude, your own persona: your own hunger, your own dedication, your own commitment that starts the ball rolling. If you haven't got these, you can't pass them on. Now you don't necessarily have to be noisy about it. Some of the quietest people have got it. Take someone like Wayne Bennett at the Brisbane Broncos: he's a quiet man, but as a human being he is absolutely loaded with the intangibles."

People have the ability to change the attitude of others through changing their own attitude. And in their own way, they become leaders. They're infectious. Their spirit is infectious.

Leading by example is a commitment, though; Harbin is absolutely clear:

"If that's what you've based your building blocks on, the intangibles, and I think that's a very secure foundation ... but when they waver in your own life, those foundations become very shaky. It's not for show – you've got to display these qualities always and all the time."

This adds up to a very clear philosophy of team performance. I asked Harbin where it comes from.

"Criticism is soul-destroying. It's so much easier to criticize than praise. I was fortunate that I did a teaching degree and we were analyzed in our classroom practice to measure how much

positive and negative reinforcement we gave. Now I'm a positive person, but the figures were alarming. At first I actually thought, 'no, that's not me', but what I needed to think was, 'yeah, that is me, and what am I going to do about it?'"

What did he learn from that?

"People have the ability to change the attitude of others through changing their own attitude. And in their own way, they become leaders. They're infectious. Their spirit is infectious. Of course if it's a positive spirit, that works well, but if it's negative it's soul-destroying. Human beings are very very powerful."

It's more than just an approach to getting things done, though. "I've got a saying pinned up in my office: 'You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give.' I taught for quite a while and you can really see how it works. Sometimes some of the young teachers found it hard with very disadvantaged kids to put their arm round them and give them the encouragement they need. But that's when you know whether it's genuine or just for show."

And in Harbin's case, it's not just for show:

"I worked with Iain at Oldham, and if I didn't think Iain had that same philosophy, I wouldn't have come here. Whatever club I went to it wouldn't matter to me what the philosophy of the manager the chairman the chief exec. I would hope that they'd have the same philosophy as me, but in the end, it wouldn't matter, because I would never ever compromise my philosophy."

"It's a strange philosophy for football. Players here say to me, 'You're one of a kind'. And I think, 'what are you talking about. I'm just normal. This is how normal human beings are'. And the great thing about it is that these things are under your control. Nobody has an influ-

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

ence on how loyal I'm going to be. That's me. Nobody has an influence on how dedicated I'm going to be. That's me. I make that decision."

Harbin tells me an anecdote which seems to sum it up.

"I was sitting on the beach reading a book by Jack Welch called 'Winning'. Looking for some new ideas. I guess it's about someone who's been pretty successful by being a bit ruthless and being well organised. He talks about sacking people, keeping people competitive. It wasn't really a turn on for me. But as I'm reading it, I see this guy in his fifties with three little kids. Two of the kids are trying to get the youngest one to go into the water. She doesn't want to go. They're trying to drag her in the water and the little girl just wouldn't go. She's screaming, and I'm thinking why doesn't this guy do something? He let them go for a little while and just watched. Then he put his arm down to this little girl and she looked up at him and took his hand. He walked her down to the edge of the water and just looked at her again and smiled at her, and he walked out into the water without a murmur. And I thought, that's what it's all about. It's about trust, caring, loving and getting somebody to achieve something that they're terrified of. That's what he did. And I threw the book about winning away. Because that guy showed in that brief moment that you'll get people to follow you into the face of fear if you show those things."

"We can all be so infectious," says Harbin, and he's the living proof of that.

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