

## **Sports Creativity: Unlimited Thinking: Unlimited Performance.**

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## **Sports Creativity: Unlimited Thinking: Unlimited Performance.**

Sport is a contradiction.

On one hand we freely use words like “excellence” and “success” and phrases like “breaking the barriers” and “setting new limits” to describe sports performance, yet sport by its nature is inherently conservative.

We may say “no limits”, yet we place our own limits on what’s possible by encasing sport in the habits, rituals, traditions, routines and practices of our sporting past.

We proclaim that as leaders in sport, as coaches, as athletes, as administrators and as educators that sport challenges the very frontiers of human endeavour, yet we surround the sports experience with rules and policies and procedures which often restrict the progress of sport.

We tell our young coaches that anything is possible, to be themselves and that the essence of greatness is being unique, being individual and in daring to be different, then we educate them to follow the teachings and experiences of others and build their coaching upon largely unproven theories, practices and principles.

We claim to invite creativity and innovation into sport with open arms yet when we are challenged, we revert to what we know – to anecdote and rumour and personal experience and place barriers before us with words like “always” and “never” and “must” and “can’t”.

Yet, now, more than ever, creativity is the lifeblood of sport. It is as essential to the future success of sport as are facilities, equipment, technology and even coaches.

I have one goal - one purpose in delivering this address to you today: to convince you that by removing the limits in your thinking, you can be a driving force for the success of sport as an institution and as the pinnacle of human endeavour.

### **Sports Creativity: Copying Kills**

Creativity is like faith. Many believe they know what it is and possess it themselves but few truly understand it.

In order to understand creativity, consider first what it is not.

Creativity is not research – although research can be driven by creative thinking.

Creativity is not searching the Internet for answers and solutions to problems any more than reading a book makes one an author.

And most importantly, creativity is not copying what others have done.

Many people confuse creativity with knowledge and falsely believe that by studying and researching the methods of successful athletes and coaches and copying their methods and practices then they too will become champions.

In the months since the London 2012 Olympic Games, sports administrators, coaches, government officials and other sporting leaders from most of the nations of the world have been travelling – “benchmarking” – to try and learn the secrets of success of the gold medal winners in the hope that by copying the winners’ training programs or their gym training routines or their sports science techniques, that greatness will also look upon them and their athletes favourably.

They believe that by studying the current limits of human performance, the secret to future sporting success will be revealed.

Yet, real creativity, creativity which is capable of changing the world, creativity which is capable of inspiring remarkable achievements, creativity which can challenge our beliefs in what human beings are capable of, has no limits.

Copying kills. To be truly creative, one must not copy the lessons and learnings of others but look to the greatness and potential which lies within us all – as individuals, as teams and even as nations.

The Internet means that knowledge is freely available to most of the people of the world. Anyone with the resources can access anything, anytime, anywhere and at minimal cost.

For centuries philosophers have claimed that knowledge is power.

In this century however, knowledge alone is worthless, for when things are easily accessible and freely available they have no value.

It is my belief that there are no secrets in sport any more.

Everyone knows what you know – especially in your own sport – *everyone* knows what you know.

It is unlikely that you can gain a performance advantage over your sporting competitors by copying others from within your sport, e.g. you cannot gain an advantage in football by copying the football programs of others.

Sporting ideas come from four places.

- From the education programs and examples within your own sport.
- From talking with people and listening to ideas and information from outside of your sport but within the sporting industry.
- From talking with people and listening to ideas and information from outside of the sporting industry.
- From your own creative skills.

Increasingly I am finding that innovative ideas, creative thinking and breakthrough sporting success stories are occurring when people open their minds and consider the world outside of their own.

In my own consulting practice I routinely connect coaches from professional football with coaches from the Olympic sports to provide the environment and the opportunity for people to learn, share and grow from the experience.

I also connect my sporting colleagues with my contacts in the business world again with the outcome being powerful thinking and often amazing new ideas coming from an expanded perspective of what's possible.

The lessons from these experiences have taught me that creativity and innovative thinking are possible from **all people** – all you need to do is provide them with the opportunity and the tools to realise the creative potential inside of them.

It has been said that “*to a man with a hammer, all things before him are nails*”. In other words, where one has only one tool to complete a task, one will shape the task to fit the tool.

The creative thinker rejects such concepts and seeks to solve problems and generate new, original and unique solutions by building a creative “tool-kit” – a range of creative skills and techniques which allow them to see what others cannot, to think what others dare not and to do what others will not.

## **Sports Innovation**

When I think about innovation, the first word that comes to mind is the word “new”, i.e. that innovation is something which is new – something which has not existed in a specific environment or context before.

It is interesting to note that many of the programs which have recently proven successful in the UK (as demonstrated by the results of Team GB at the London 2012 Olympic Games) were copied from similar programs used in Australia in preparation for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. On further analysis, it can be noted that similar programs were also utilised by the government sporting organisations of the Olympic host nations going back to 1972.

The lesson from this is that *real* innovation in sport is very very rare.

In reality, what most people refer as being **sports innovation** is really **sports duplication**.

The reason for this lies in risk management.

Governments and indeed sporting organisations, coaches and athletes prefer to adopt programs and practices which they believe have led to success in other environments. It is

simpler and easier – they believe - to merely import knowledge, skills, experience and people from other places and implement programs and practices which have worked in other nations.

However, my experience is that this practice rarely, if ever, works as expected.

It is not possible to replicate a sporting system or sporting program outside of the culture which created it, e.g. sporting programs developed in Australia, may work in Australia within the Australian cultural context but the chance of them proving to be as successful in other cultures is very unlikely.

This does not mean that we cannot learn from other sporting nations. It does mean however, that we must be careful to clearly understand the line between learning and copying.

The benchmark programs and practices that currently exist in successful sporting nations are not the end point: they are merely the beginning – the place to start and the platform from which to build a successful sporting future for your own nation.

Innovation in sport is also more than words.

It is common for sporting organisations and government sporting institutions around the world to merely change the names of sporting programs without changing the practices, the people or principles of those programs, i.e. a change in name only.

For example, many nations had a Sydney Olympic Athlete Program in place prior to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Following the 2000 Games, these nations typically changed the name of their national athlete development program to the Athens Olympic Athlete Program which in turn became the Beijing Olympic Athlete Program and then evolved into the London Olympic Athlete Program. Whilst the program name had changed, it was in reality the same people, doing the same things, the same way with the same money.

Innovation by contrast means that the nation must embrace doing things differently – to invite change and to openly and warmly welcome newness.

And this is the real problem for governments and sporting organisations claiming to seek innovation in sport.

Few sporting leaders have the courage and capacity to accept the risks required to truly embrace creativity and innovation. Whilst the potential rewards of creativity and innovation

are immense and offer the opportunity to gain a significant performance advantage over your competition, in a world of financial and political responsibility, it is also a high risk strategy.

Often when I am asked to help sporting organisations create and innovate new ideas, they will use the terminology, “*we want ideas which are outside the box*”. In other words, they claim to seek ideas which are radically different to those they currently adhere to.

In reality I have found this is rarely the case and that most sporting organisations are only capable of small variations in their current practices – they are terrified of real change and resistant of real innovation.

Hence, unfortunately, in my experience with sport around the world, very few sporting organisations or institutions are operating at their full capacity: they prefer history and tradition over creativity and innovation and therefore never realise their full potential.

Ultimately the people who pay the highest price for this limited thinking are the nation’s athletes.

The question then becomes, “*is it possible to change people and organisations from thinking within the limits of what they know, to being courageous and brave and pursue the unlimited world of the unknown?*”

### **Developing Skills of Thinking and Creativity: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learnt.**

I believe with absolute certainty that creativity cannot be *learnt*.

Why? Because it is unnecessary to *learn* it – “learning” implies you don’t already know something.

Each of you here today possesses a creative spirit. You have simply forgotten how to use it.

As an example, I would like each of you to take out a piece of paper or note pad and work with me on a simple creative thinking exercise. I call this the “*Rose By Another Name*” Exercise.

I want you to look at an object in this room and write down as many uses for that object that you can think of – other than its traditional use. For example, a white board could be used as a “table” or as a “room divider” or a “bed”. Take a few minutes to complete this exercise.

I have done this exercise and other similar creative thinking exercises all over the world, with athletes, with coaches, with corporate leaders, with politicians, with school teachers and with educators.

Without doubt, the group who are the best at completing this exercise are children aged 5-10 years of age.

Why?

It is because at that age, they have limitless thinking. They dream, they think, they create, they invent and they innovate without limits – they just do it.

Consider this in the sporting context and specifically in the area of coach education.

Coaches all over the world undergo similar training programs constructed mostly around sports science, periodisation, planning and the principles and concepts of training.

From the very first coach education training lecture we instruct them that to be a coach, they must periodise this way, coach that way, test another way and follow a tried and tested methodology based on the coaching practices of previous generations of coaches. It is commonplace for example that football coaches are educated by football coaches who were educated by football coaches who were educated by football coaches and so on. As a result, football coaches believe that there is only one way of doing things – THE football way.

In other words, in an industry where limitless thinking produces greatness and creativity is the most precious commodity we have, we commence the education of the drivers of change – our coaches – with a list of rules and regulations about how they must do what they do. We begin their training as coaches by placing limits on their coaching, then we wonder why that as high performance coaches they have a limited ability to think creatively or innovate brilliantly.

It is my belief that with so much knowledge freely available via the internet, it should be our commitment and obligation to teach sports coaches HOW TO THINK – as opposed to

WHAT TO THINK and that when we educate our coaches and for that matter our sports scientists, sports administrators and other sporting leaders, we talk in terms of exploring and embracing the unknown rather than becoming a disciple of what's already known.

The real advantage in sport in this century is not knowledge, but the capacity to create more effectively, innovate more efficiently, learn faster and apply that learning to performance more rapidly than your competitors. Sporting success is now a matter of accelerated learning: think better, create better – win sooner.

### **Potential and Skills of Creativity – What are Human Beings Capable of**

I am often asked about the limits to human performance and sporting achievement.

Every time some expert or academic makes a statement that “*we have reached the limits of what's possible*”, a great athlete or coach turns us into fools. Such is the nature of greatness: to think and to act differently and to make possible what others think is impossible.

My belief is that it is that whilst it is likely there are some limits to what the human **body** is capable of, I am absolutely certain that there are no limits to what the human **mind** is capable of.

And that being the case, the limitations we have placed on physical achievement are not limits at all – they are merely temporary barriers in our thinking – barriers which can be overcome with a commitment to creativity.

There is a commonly held belief that sport is in some way an environment where creativity cannot and does not exist; that anyone involved in sport is more concerned with training than with thinking, more interested in lactic acid than learning and more interested in competition than creativity.

I would like to refute that belief.

Sport is creative. It has to be.

There is saying – “*success is a moving target*”. This means that success is not a final destination – it is an ongoing search for improvement and performance enhancement.



One only needs to consider the world records of the Olympic sports in the 1980s and note that many of them represent only mediocrity when compared to the performances of the Olympic champions in 2012.

Success in sport – performance in sport, is a moving target. We search tirelessly for new ideas, breakthroughs in research, new coaching practices, alternate ways of preparing athletes, better ways of doing things. By any definition, sport is a creative endeavour.

We seek to set new limits, to do what's never been done before, to reach for new horizons and to redefine what's possible and once we do this, we immediately commence the process of improving on what we have achieved. Sport indeed can in many ways be considered an art form.

In reality, sport is – has to be, a very creative industry and to the athletes, coaches and sporting professionals who recognise this, success is inevitable.

### **Models and Examples of Creativity at Work in Sport.**

Creativity in sport is everywhere. I believe that creativity in sport has gone “mainstream” – from being an abstract concept to becoming an essential and fundamental skill that everyone involved in sport needs to utilise and practice regularly.

But I would like to talk specifically about the application of creativity in three areas of sport: coaching, sports administration and sports science.

We are – all of us in sport – around the world facing a “different” type of athlete these days. The Internet, television, social media and other technologies means we are working with young athletes who seek to be entertained and not merely trained.

In the past, coaches have relied on coaching by routine, ritual and organised practice. Coaches have planned and periodised their training programs weeks, months or even years in advance and then instructed athletes to follow these programs without variation.

The sports of swimming, diving, gymnastics, rowing, professional tennis and other sports which demand a considerable investment of time, energy and resources – not just from

athletes and coaches but from the parents of athletes, are all facing considerable challenges all over the world.

Numbers of competitive athletes in many of the traditional “high time commitment” sports are falling – certainly in most western nations - and it is my view that much of this decline in numbers is due to the lack of creativity of many coaches.

Far too many coaches coach not by the heart – but by the stop watch, the pace clock, the heart rate monitor and the measuring tape. Their commitment is to the application and implementation of “the program” – not to the athlete. Yet, we know that research into the communication practices of teenagers in western society tells us that now more than ever they are motivated and driven by the need to be connected to those around them.

Coaching can be – and should be - a creative endeavour. Great coaches are able to inspire athletes to achieve remarkable things through their ability to engage with athletes personally and individually and by building training environments which stimulate and excite athletes.

It is vital for the future success of sport that coaches learn and practice the skills of creativity and in doing so consistently create an engaging, entertaining, enjoyable and exciting training environment which provides each and every individual athlete with the opportunity to realise their full potential.

Similarly sports administrators should adopt the mantra of creativity in their daily work environment.

We have moved into the era of “client focused sport”. In other words, sporting organisations no longer own sport – sports administrators are no longer the custodians of sport: sport is own by the people who play sport and their families.

Smart Sports – (i.e. those who have adopted and applied a more creative philosophy to their practices) - around the world who understand this shift to a client focused approach to sports participation, are proving to be successful regardless of changes in the world economy or other social challenges.

We are seeing sporting organisations develop hybrid versions of their sports which are shorter, faster and more inclusive than the traditional versions of the sport. Successful sports are also increasingly engaging with the parents and families of young athletes and inviting

them to become activity involved even to the point of joining in with the training process in some cases.

I often refer to two types of sport: Old Sport and New Sport.

Old Sport is where a sporting organisation delivered their “product”, i.e. the sport, to the “clients”, i.e. the athletes, coaches, families etc. In Old Sport, the clients received the same product year after year. The “clients” attended the same competitions, the same ceremonies, the same training camps over and over again and not surprisingly, participation in these sports has been in decline all over the world for the past decade.

New sport is where a sporting organisation listens to the needs of their clients and provides a high quality product which meets the unique demands of the sport’s participants. These sports – these New Sports - are flourishing and will continue to do so while they maintain their commitment to continuous improvement, intelligent change and creative thinking.

And finally, sports science, whilst maintaining the need for scientific rigour and scientific method, must become a more creative pursuit.

There is a sameness about sports science all over the world. It is routinely practiced in academic intuitions, sporting academies and in the performance environments of professional teams the same way everywhere: individual disciplines doing the same things the same way and within a very narrow paradigm.

There exists however an opportunity for progressive sporting institutions to break the traditional bonds of the practices of the sports science community and adopt a more integrated, multi-disciplinary way of doing things.

We are seeing some isolated examples of evolution in the sports science industry with the introduction of specialist units in “Sports psycho-physiology” which are exploring the mind-body link in peak sports performance and other similar multi-disciplinary approaches e.g. combining sports physiology and sports biomechanics. However it must be said, that merely changing the name of a sports science department or faculty is not the solution: it demands a new level of thinking: creative thinking.

As with all creative thinking there is now and will always be a level of resistance from those who seek to maintain the status quo. In every sporting organisation there are three types of

people. Those who think creatively and embrace change, those who oppose creative thinking and reject change and those who just accept what is and live life the same today as it was yesterday.

My challenge to you is – in which group do you sit?

### **Summary:**

This is my first visit to the Middle East. I sincerely hope it will not be my last.

I have of course watched, listened and read about the people and places of the Middle East through the media, since I was a child growing up in Australia.

Although living on the other side of the world, in a place very different to here, I have seen enough of you, your people, your culture and your environment to say this.

Be yourself.

Do it your own way.

You have demonstrated over millennia your capacity for survival, for endurance, for innovation, for overcoming adversity, for resilience, for toughness and for ingenuity. These are not just the qualities of a great nation.....these are the qualities of a great sporting nation. What you have achieved as a people, as a nation and as a culture is remarkable and it is renowned and respected around the world.

Whilst the abundance of natural resources found in UAE allows you to recruit some of the most talented people in the world to contribute to your national sporting programs, in my view, your sustainable success in sport will come from *within* this nation and from many of the people sitting here in this room.

It will come from the hearts and minds and energies of the sporting leaders of this nation – from athletes, from coaches, from sports administrators, from sports scientists, from sports medicine practitioners – it will come from you.

Every great athlete, every great team, every great coach and every great sporting nation that I have worked with over the past twenty years has become great not by trying to emulate the

sporting philosophies of others but by embracing and unleashing the creativity, innovation and greatness which lies within.

Creativity comes to most of us not as a ranging torrent of limitless ideas but as a tiny trickle of thought or a few drops of innovation.

The creative thinker then provides this trickle and these drops with the opportunity to flow and grow until they rush forward with the unstoppable force of a mighty river.

As you enjoy the remainder of this wonderful symposium, I urge you to not just listen to the messages and compile them into a set of comprehensive notes to read or not read in a month or two, but to be inspired by what you see and hear and embrace your own creative spirit.

It is said, that *what lies behind us and what lies before us is nothing compared to what lies within us.*

Within each of you is a creative spirit which is capable of amazing things: trust in it, believe in it, and give it the opportunity to flourish and to grow and unleash it on the sporting world.

Thank you.

**Wayne Goldsmith**

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