

Leading to sustained success with a high-performance culture

by Vic Luck, Director, FLS

Sam Walker's excellent book published earlier this year (*The Captain Class*) identified the most successful teams in the history of sport and then evidenced that the main factor driving that success was the character of the captain. In all, Walker identified 16 teams that met his tough criteria to be included in the list, in that they competed in major sports, were dominant over the competition and their achievements stood apart from all other teams in the history of their sport. A further 106 teams came close to this elite group, but fell down in some respect against these criteria.

Of course, teams do not stay together for ever and captains retire or move on, and it was notable that the period over which 'success' was achieved by these 16 superior teams was limited in most cases to around five years (though the Boston Celtics exceptionally dominated the NBA with their team from 1956 to 1969); and further, only one sporting organisation - the All Blacks - featured with more than one entry of different teams dominating in different eras (it featured twice, with a gap of 21 years between these entries).

So what does it take to dominate the competition (or at least achieve an organisation's criteria of 'sustained success') for several generations of teams and captains?

To answer this question, we can draw on research into long-successful businesses as well as observe those few sporting organisations that have repeated multi-season stays at 'the top', even if they didn't totally dominate their sport. And we can enrich our findings with recent work by UK Sport to define the 'golden threads' of high-performance cultures.

Pooling these sources, my conclusions are that to sustain success over many years at the very top in their chosen competitions, successive generations of leaders of sporting organisations - governing bodies and individual clubs - must strive for a culture that:

1. Pursues a purpose beyond commercial success - the organisation exists for the sake of its sport, participants and fans; indeed, as a representation of those fans, traditionally often their geographic identity, though this is waning in some cases with globalisation and franchising
2. Has as its compelling goal to be 'forever number one' (as the Bayern Munich anthem has it)
3. Adopts a distinctive cult-like set of attitudes and behaviours that reflect the organisation's heritage and set its athletes, staff and fans apart

from the competition. A strong 'in crowd' identity meets a basic human need of fans and can galvanise athletes into impassioned performance

4. Restlessly seeks to improve day after day in a challenging yet supportive way, throughout the organisation, from boardroom to bootroom

5. Builds for the longer term with a comprehensive and integrated strategy that embraces: immediate match-day performance; mid-term development of talent; a financially-sound and progressive business strategy; and a sustainable ownership, funding and governance model. These factors are explored further below.

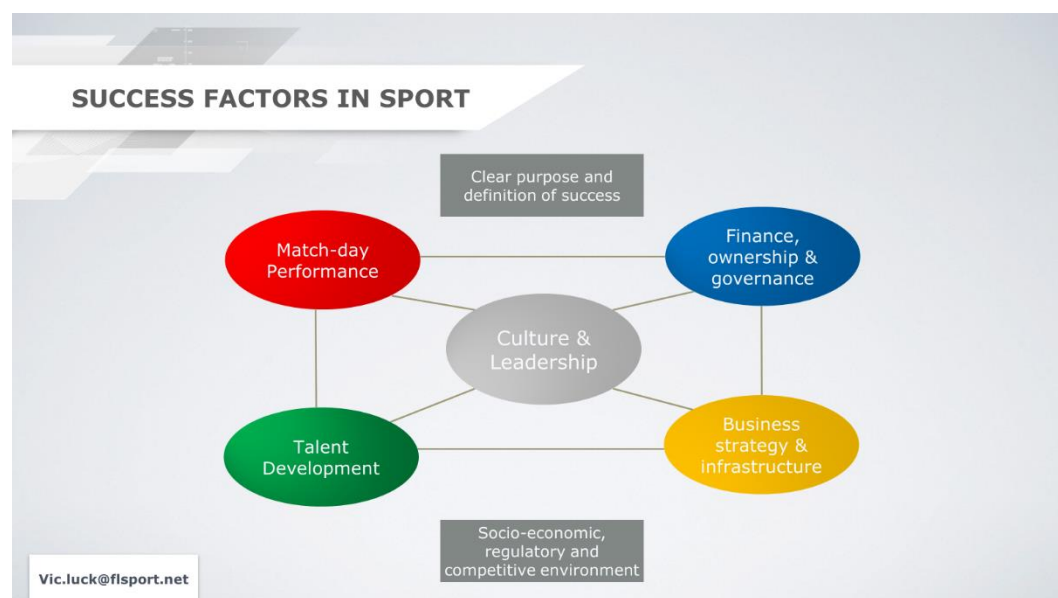
6. Respects and cares for individuals and values their differences, enabling them to develop as well-rounded persons, both for immediate sporting performance gains and for longer-term personal growth

7. Promotes acting with integrity and for the good of the sport

8. Develops and appoints leaders throughout the organisation who reflect and preserve this culture

Since we formed FLS in 2011, we've seen some National Governing Bodies adopt rigorous approaches to developing a longer-term vision and an integrated strategy to deliver it. Notably the RFU has done so, accompanied too by substantial improvements in governance and investments in leadership development; some others have been less progressive. Likewise, among sports clubs a few exemplars stand out, including South Coast football clubs Bournemouth, Brighton and Southampton that have implemented purposeful longer-term development strategies.

But many sporting organisations would not measure up well against the characteristics I list, and so it may be helpful to expand on item 5 of the list by reference to a chart I use in workshops to facilitate the development of just the type of approach that will lead to sustained success. This will also serve to illustrate the importance of culture as the integrating and driving force behind sustained success.



The chart provides an overview of the main factors that need be considered in formulating a strategy for sustained long term success.

At the outset, the organisation's leadership needs to confirm its **purpose** and ambition: how is 'sustained long term success' to be defined, in terms of results from competitions and in other dimensions: community development, fan base satisfaction, commercial benefits and financial circumstances, etc - and over what period? This could well be expressed as an inspiring vision of future performance in all these dimensions. The determination of this vision will influence decisions on such matters as investing in youth development and stadia, ticket pricing and so forth. Of course, a major determinant of these goals will be the members, owners, fans and funders, to whom the executive leadership will be accountable.

Those goals and strategy need to be formulated in the context too of the socio-economic **environment** and fan base profile for the sport, as well as the regulatory framework such as football's Financial Fair Play rules, and the strategies and strengths of competing organisations, for example in the market for athletic talent and coaches, securing sponsors and so forth.

At the centre of the diagram, I've placed the high performance **culture** (the eight-point list above) and the **leadership** that secures it, for this will influence, and itself be driven by, the decisions, attitudes and behaviours in each of the four other ellipses, which are interrelated as shown.

It is because of the interrelationships and dynamics among these factors that a comprehensive and consistent approach is required to secure an effective and efficient organisation to support **match-day performances** winning after winning. If elements of the strategy are not aligned then success on the field of play may only be fleeting; a powerful captain may well motivate a talented team to repeated success within a modest period of time, but unless that team is being renewed regularly and future team leaders developed, the next generation of athletes will not perform so well and success will not be sustained. What we see is success on the field of play; but the seeds of that success are sown in the boardroom. And of course the style of play we see needs both to be attractive to fans and a manifestation of the organisations' culture.

Consequently, **talent development** is critical, to supply the pipeline replacing athletes who are past their peak, along with provision of coaches and support such as performance analysts, physios, nutritionists, strength & conditioning staff. Unsurprisingly, this area has received a lot of attention by governing bodies in respect of

national teams, and so too by clubs; yet in both spheres, what appear knee-jerk decisions are often made in the light of short term results, with the organisation seemingly having no contingency succession plans in place. There remain uncertainties too in football over how much to invest in and rely upon home-grown academy players compared to buying in experienced players . Herein lies another example of interrelationships among the strategic factors: how much money is available from owners and commercial arrangements will determine the scope for buying-in; a strong sense of obligations to develop players from the community may drive a decision to invest in local youth and home-grown athletes will be schooled in the values and style of play from a young age. Another aspect that impacts athlete motivation and so performance, and how attractive is the sport or club to join, will be how well people are cared for and developed in the round. One of the key factors behind Saracens continued success in the English Premiership and European Champions rugby competitions are their practices in just this area, which makes the club a very rewarding organisation to join and where a strongly-bonded group works so hard for each other: the archetypical 'band of brothers'.

Away from the training ground, the **business strategy** will embrace marketing decisions such as ticket pricing and sponsorship arrangements as well as determining investment in stadia facilities, digital technology and so forth. Again, these will be influenced by other factors such as the ownership structure. Bayern Munich (along with several other very successful Continental football clubs) remains under the ownership of club members and so has to manage finances differently from the Sheik Mansour-owned Manchester City, where also gate and TV revenue far outstrip the equivalent in Germany.

And so it is clear that **ownership, financing and governance** have a major impact on the options available to executive leaders in planning a strategy. For National Governing Bodies the funding regime of UK Sport brings obligations to meet performance targets; the owners will be equally looking to clubs to perform to expectation. In the context of seeking sustained success over many years, strong governance is vital to avoid the fate of clubs falling from the heights due to financial mis-management and to prevent the severe damage to reputation that results from failings in Duty of Care towards people.

To me, THE question this analysis begs is whether owners and funders are working to long term timescales in which to develop a high performance culture as described; so, coming full circle in looking at this chart, it is critical that the definition of 'sustained success' is examined fully and a solid agreement made on the balance between immediate results and building such a long-lasting culture.

For sustained success takes years of effort by successive leaders to put in place and preserve that high performance culture: few sporting organisations can demonstrate ALL the eight characteristics in my list, nor the approach that manages well the dynamic inter-play between the charted factors for success. Big money can buy success, but it doesn't guarantee it; the key is cultural as much as financial.

It is for today's leaders to ensure that tomorrow's leaders are nurtured and appointed who fit with and will be the guardians of that distinctive culture; recruiting a head coach who reflects the heritage, identity and values is key, but so too is the development of athletes who will be strong leaders on the pitch and executives who will be making decisions in the boardroom which will generate success beyond their tenure.

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