

Mind

Bill Shankly once famously told a player: "The problem with you son is that your brains are all in your head." But motivator extraordinaire Watt Nichol says a great footballer isn't defined by two good feet, but by his mental ability to play the "inner game"

Words Patrick Maskall
Photos Empics, Getty Images



30 Years

The cliché that football is a physical game is almost as old as football itself. But, according to Watt Nichol, a man who is billed in America as 'the guru of personal reinvention', the cliché is completely wrong. "Football is about 20 per cent physical and 80 per cent mental. But most of the training that players do is physical. They need to work out more in the mental gymnasium."

Before you dismiss this amiable and slightly eccentric former Scottish MP and folk musician as the motivational equivalent of a carnival hypnotist, take a look at his client list: national football teams, Premiership clubs, top players, Formula One driver David Coulthard, an ex-boy band member gone solo who has enjoyed phenomenal success and a certain American golfer at the very top of his sport... He's helped them all. "I have never had to advertise," Watt says. "It's always just been by word of mouth."

So how has he helped footballers? Nichol has to be reasonably discreet, but when challenged, says immodestly: "In football terms I'm called the difference maker." Here, exclusively for *Champions*, he answers a few questions about the mental aspect of football.

What attracts you to football so much now?

Golfers and tennis players are much more aware of the inner game. Footballers don't play the inner game. It's seen as an external game. But when they gain that awareness, you can almost see the lights come on.

Where do you start?

Most of what I deal with is getting players to understand that if they don't have their personal lives in order, they won't be in a fit state to perform as a footballer.

In what respect?

A player's relationships with his partner, his friends, children... these relationships aren't really valued in football, yet they enable players to be able to bond or not. With a team, it's about creating common purpose. That's next to impossible if the individuals don't come in with a clear mind. In martial arts, when you get to the door of the gym, you stay there until you feel you've cleared your mind. If you can't, you don't come in. I don't think that would go down too well with most football coaches, but the principle is essential. It allows for a much greater capacity for understanding and concentration and you can start to build what I call critical mass.

Explain what you mean by critical mass...

The critical mass of a football team is where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It's so easy to improve a team if you work on group dynamics rather than just looking at highly skilled individuals. If you create a team of prima donnas, you face problems. But if you

have eleven men with critical mass – no egos, but total belief in the theory that "together we're stronger" – that's when the magic happens. I'd like to see clubs buy players not only for their skills, reputation or ability, but because of their capacity to fit within the group dynamics of the dressing room. I'd say it's even more important than pure ability.

You can achieve a lot if you gel a team together, even if they're not as individually talented as a glamour team. In a word, it's persistence. You cannot beat a persistent critical mass. If you can send on eleven people with a common purpose, with an imbedded persistence, backed up by their own personal support system – if it's meaningful to their partner, children, parents – that's awesome.

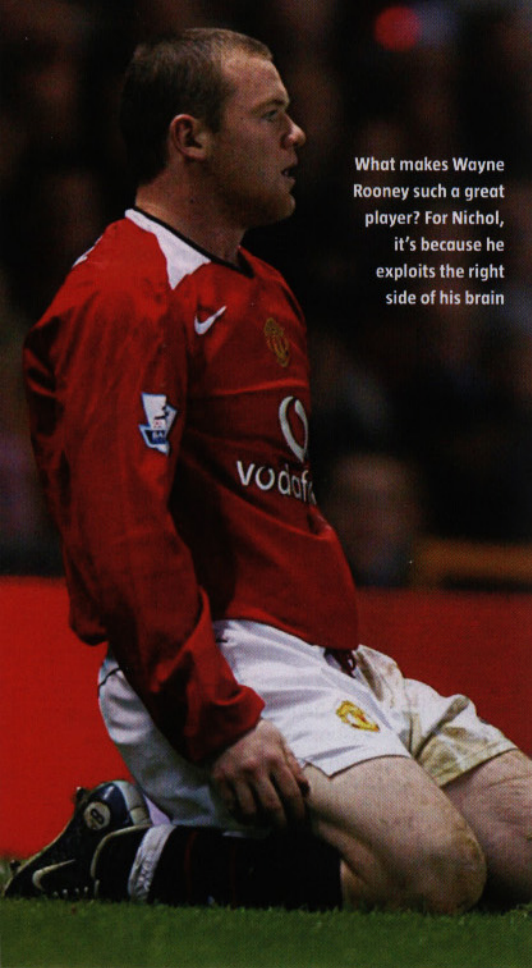
But how might that support system help?

I've been working with a young Premiership player who has made a handful of first-team appearances this season, but who got injured after breaking through and was shattered. I know he's besotted with his baby daughter. So I asked him, "Every time you think it's too hard, just think of your little girl – if she had problems learning to walk, how long would you persevere before you quit?" He said he'd never quit. I used that to help him. We've trained him to think of his daughter at times



"Zidane and a third division player can have similar skills, but he makes the right decisions" Watt Nichol

when he's feeling pressure. I've done a lot of work with Edwin van der Sar. Edwin doesn't need motivating. But to get that extra percentage, I asked him to look out of the coach window on the way to the ground at all the men taking their sons to the game. When he does that now, I've got him thinking, "Those men are taking their boys to see me, so I must not let these fathers down. Not just in my ability as a goalkeeper, but in how I conduct myself, how I prepare, how I work." And he has responded so well. Edwin is so aware of how he walks into a stadium, how he warms up, how he acknowledges the crowd. →



What makes Wayne Rooney such a great player? For Nichol, it's because he exploits the right side of his brain

But people like poets and artists tend to be right hemispherically dominant because they have to be creative. They go down avenues that nobody has gone down before. Coaches usually don't like right hemispherically dominant people because they're the types of players who do all the fancy stuff and coaches want players to do specific things. But when you talk about a player like Wayne who can win a game by himself, it's because he is right hemispherically dominant. He's emotionally charged.

So where does someone like David Beckham fit in to the winner-champion-legend-hero model?

David is a legend. He's subconsciously working towards that everyday. He's a hard worker and he'd take the long-term view - it's not just a question of living today. Each win is a step towards becoming a champion. Now he's been a champion while he's working on becoming a legend - he wants to become unforgettable.

How does the speed of the game affect a player's mental attitude?

We all follow the same thought process, but for a footballer during a game, that process happens in a millisecond. Number one is perception - you look and listen. The next stage is analysis, which then leads to decision-making, which is converted into an action.

But if the initial perception is flawed, so is

the analysis that leads to a poor decision and inappropriate action. For a footballer, 95 per cent of a thought process is about quality perception. You'd be amazed at how inadequately some top players see reality. They see what they want to see, what they've been told should be happening, rather than what is happening.

The biggest mistake with perception is putting the emphasis on the most recent piece of information - for example, is the ball or a member of the opposition coming towards me? At that point the player must have the mental agility to see the bigger picture. If the process was slowed down of course we want them to perceive what they can immediately see and hear. But that's just new information. But the most powerful thought at this stage is, "I've prepared for this and I have the speed, power, agility and skill to overcome this. I have dealt with this situation 25,000 times and there are 35 ways to deal with it."

The difference between Zidane and a third division player can be minimal. They could have similar physical skills, but Zidane chooses to do the right thing at the right time. That's what makes him the player he is. It may not look like a thought process is going on, that it's instinctive, but every movement of the body is instructed by the brain and if we can train those processes, players will become better. ★

You worked with Wayne Rooney while at Everton...

Wayne was a very interesting player to work with. I always ask players this: "Do you want to be a winner, a champion, a hero or a legend?" All players need to at least be winners - they'll do what ever it takes to win. Champions will campaign to get there over time. A legend is someone who works to a set of values over an extended period of time in such a way he becomes unforgettable. A hero is an individual and will always be. Wayne is the most outstanding example of a hero I've ever worked with in any walk of life. You can tell by how positively and immediately he responds to the roar of the crowd. I had little or nothing to do with the way he turned out. But I did recognise the hero within him, that's vital. He's an individual and you have to recognise that within the dynamics of the team. If you have a hero in your midst, use him as a hero. If you try to use him as part of the group dynamic he'll break it because whenever he hears the roar of the crowd he'll break rank.

What makes Rooney an individual 'hero'?

It's to do with something called hemispheric dominance. The right side of the brain and the left side of the brain have different functions. People who are right hemispherically dominant will use their imagination, those who are left hemispherically dominant will use their memory. As a nation, we tend to be left hemispherically dominant, our educational system is based on retention of information.

The difference maker

How would Watt Nichol make a difference with these greats?

"I'd get Ronaldo to visualise what it'll be like when he stops playing. He won't be remembered as a legend like Pelé. Make him uncomfortable with how he'll be remembered and I'd hope I could lift him"



"If you break Vieira's cool, his talent is flawed. If he sees that weakness, he immediately becomes a better player"