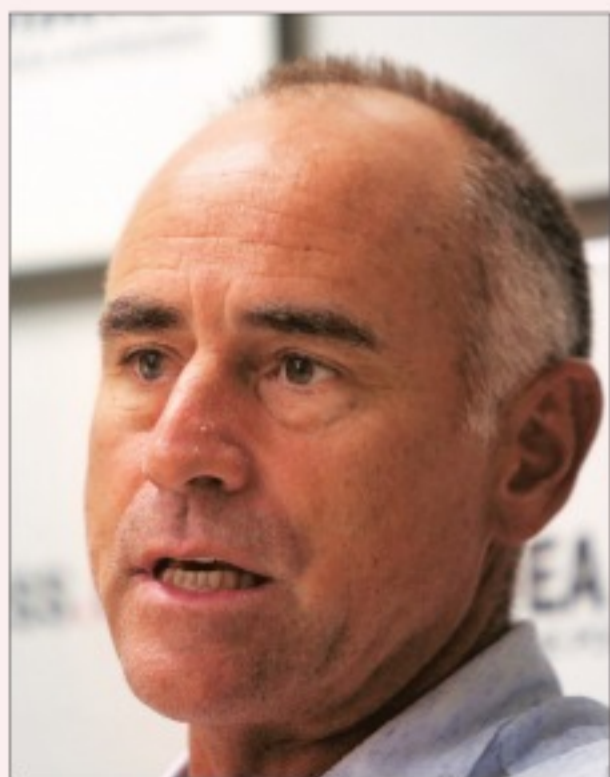


# Idea Exchange

SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 2019

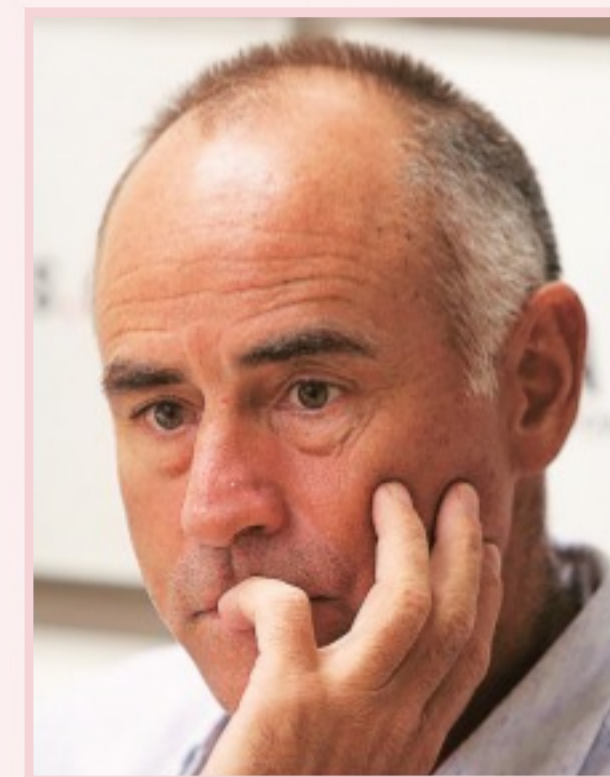
In 2008, we came with ears, eyes open, mouths shut... We used servant-leadership approach, less familiar to Indians... Their parents, coaches had used authoritarian ways... Buy-in was slow, but it was genuine"



## WHY PADDY UPTON

A FITNESS TRAINER with a PhD in sports science, leadership coach, mind guru, passionate surfer, social worker — Paddy Upton wears many hats. Appointed the mental conditioning and strategic leadership coach of the Indian cricket team in 2008, Upton, along with head coach Gary Kirsten, led the side to a World Cup win in 2011 after

nearly 30 years. In the recently concluded Indian Premier League season, he served as head coach of Rajasthan Royals. A Professor of Practice at Australia's Deakin University, last month, Upton released his book *The Barefoot Coach*, which chronicles his experiences and insights from 'coaching the world's best cricketers'



"When you have a senior player getting emotional around mistakes, that increases the fear of failure and pressure, and decreases the chance of youngsters performing. It is something Dhoni does so well. He remains calm"

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** The Indian Premier League season wasn't very good for the Rajasthan Royals. How do you assess the team's performance?

There are two aspects to it. In terms of practice, preparation, diets, and the new innovations that we brought into the game, I don't think I have ever done a more comprehensive job with a team in any of the T20 tournaments. Obviously, it's the player's responsibility to perform on the field. The reality is that it was a season of missed opportunities. We had games where the advantage was with us... I think particularly in the first game we had the Mankading incident against Kings XI Punjab. ('Mankading', named after Indian bowler Vinoo Mankad, is a method of run out where a bowler dismisses a non-striker by removing the bails before bowling, when the latter is outside the crease.) We needed to score 39 runs in 24 balls, we had six wickets in hand, we should have won that. We handed two games to Chennai Super Kings. It was probably the best Rajasthan Royals team in all the IPLs so far, but it was our worst turnout.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** There was a huge debate over the Mankading episode. What is your take?

It is debatable. Was it spontaneous in his (Kings XI Punjab captain Ravichandran Ashwin) bowling action or did he wait for Butler (Jos Butler of Rajasthan Royals) to fall out of the crease and then run him out? That's one debate. The other debate is about what a team or an individual subscribes to, and that's a personal preference. But walking off the field, virtually not one of his (Ashwin's) teammates looked any of our players in the eye. I know some of their (Kings XI Punjab's) coaching staff really well. Even they couldn't look me in the eye. To me that was a very strong tell-tale that the team didn't necessarily subscribe to what had happened. All I did was shake his (Ashwin's) hand... I just held his hand long enough to give him time to look me in the eye. I just waited and then let go.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** You don't have the kind of cricketing record that some of the IPL coaches such as Stephen Fleming and Ricky Ponting do. Did it worry you when your team was up against, say, Ponting's side?

Till about 20 years ago, most people were happy to receive instructions from somebody who knew better. Actually, that method of leadership has been around since the beginning of the industrial era, which is early 18th century. So for 200 years we have had this approach. It's not dissimilar to the approach that (former Indian coach) Greg Chappell used with the Indian team. But that has fundamentally changed because of the Internet. The expertise that the head coach had 20 years ago is now available on the World Wide Web. It's no longer possible for anybody to be an expert on any subject. That information is being upgraded every day on the Internet.

I was first interviewed for the position of the head coach of Rajasthan Royals in 2012... I had been a fitness trainer back in the '90s in international cricket and I had been a mental conditioning coach. One of the members on the interview panel, Clive Woodward (former English rugby union player and coach), said to me, 'Paddy, I believe you are not actually a cricket coach per se. So you will get a batting coach, a bowling coach and maybe a fielding coach to bring the cricket expertise.' I told him my prerequisites would be that I want no batting coach, no bowling coach, no fielding coach, and also no fitness trainer... If you give me the position of head coach you are going to give me 25 cricketers who come from five different countries, each with their own idea of how to play T20 cricket. Collectively, the team would have more than a thousand games of T20 between them. That's the expertise I would use for the entire game. My approach to coaching is to harness the collective intelligence that sits within the playing group.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** As the mental conditioning coach of the Indian cricket team, how difficult was it to get the players to open up to you?

We (Gary Kirsten and Upton) had done a lot of homework. Gary had conversations with every player about what it is that they wanted from me as coach. After Chappell, there was a six-month period with a caretaker coach, and the players felt a lack of direction. We also learned that the unhappiness in the team under Chappell was not so much about his knowledge of the game, but more the method he used to impose his

# I have never met an athlete without insecurity, doubt. That they should not have it is rubbish

Rajasthan Royals head coach Paddy Upton talks about his stint as mental conditioning coach with the 2011 World Cup-winning Indian team and about getting players to open up, says Dhoni's 'strategic brain' sets him apart, and recounts his 'biggest professional mistake'



Paddy Upton with National Sports Editor Sandeep Dwivedi in *The Indian Express* newsroom

GAJENDRA YADAV

knowledge. So we understood what not to do. In hindsight, one of our greatest weaknesses coming into work with the Indian team in 2008 was also our greatest strength. We didn't know the Indian players and we didn't know India. So we came in with our ears wide open, our eyes wide open, our mouths largely shut, and we sought to understand the system, the players... The players soon realised that these guys aren't here to tell us what to do, to control us... It wasn't immediate... We used the servant-leadership approach, which I think is less familiar to most Indians as most of them grow up with a very authoritarian approach. Their parents, teachers, coaches have used very authoritarian, dictatorial ways with them. So we definitely brought in a different way. The buy-in was slow, but when it came, it was genuine.

**MIHIR VASAVDA:** What happens in the dressing room when a junior player drops a catch, and you have an aggressive captain like Virat Kohli at the helm?

The single biggest mental obstacle to success in cricket, and probably any sport, is fear of failure and pressure. When you have a senior player who gets very emotional around mistakes, that increases the fear of failure and the pressure, and decreases the chance of younger players performing. I think it is something M S Dhoni does so well. He remains calm and composed regardless. If a young player drops a catch, particularly in an IPL game or a big game, can you imagine what it must be like for him? Nearly 40,000-50,000 people in the stands, 350 million people watching, journalists sitting there making notes on the game and someone drops a catch. That person needs senior players to come running to him, put their arm around him, give him love, support, and tell him it is okay.

**DAKSH PANWAR:** While some players endorse mental conditioning in sports, there are also some who don't. How did you reach out to the latter?

I don't. There is a chapter in my book on my views on mental conditioning. In that chapter I talk about mental strength, which I believe is like Batman and Superman. We all know of Batman and Superman and their mental strength, but none of that exists. There is no such thing. There are just over 30 academic papers published in peer reviewed journals on mental toughness. These papers are authored by just over 40 doctors and PhDs in sports psychology and psychologists, and none of them can

agree on the definition of mental toughness or mental strength. All of them say there is actually no such thing. That it is actually made up of some components like grit, determination, focus etc... The problem is that we associate mental toughness with being macho, tough, aggressive etc. Anything short of that is labelled as mental weakness. In reality, apart from a few, I have never worked or met any athlete in cricket or any other sport who doesn't have insecurity, doubt, vulnerability and negative thoughts. It's normal. We all have them and the expectation that athletes should not have these (emotions) is rubbish.

**NIHAL KOSHIE:** How do you see S Sreesanth's career graph?

As with people who are bordering on genius, and he was bordering on genius as a bowler... they don't just have that eccentricity on the field, it is also off the field... He was an eccentric personality. And I'm not sure if at the time his eccentricities were actually accepted or shunned. I think his time in cricket teams in India was difficult because people didn't really accept him for being an eccentric individual. He was an artiste and his behaviour was not mainstream, conservative, like other male athletes. However, he then went beyond the realm of what's expected even of someone who is eccentric. His involvement in the apparent match-fixing... It was very unfortunate that he chose that path. But being as good as he was, I don't think he was managed as well as he could have been, as just a very different individual.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** How was the Indian dressing room different from the others you have seen in the past?

Fortunately, I had read and studied enough, and asked questions... So when I

saw some of the things, I understood them. I learnt that what we needed to manage were things like young players not being free to speak up in team meetings. That is changing in IPL teams now. The other thing that I learnt was that Indian players would tend to not give direct negative feedback to us as coaches. So, many times Gary and I would come up with a new idea and ask players about their views on it. Almost every time everyone would go, 'Yes, that's great. Let's go with it.' But we understood that it was more out of respect for coaches and authority that they were saying yes. So we needed to understand that when someone said yes, they actually meant no.

About three-four months into my tenure here, I was reading business, economics, philosophy books about understanding India and Indians, and the DNA of the Indian psyche. Once, Robin Singh was sitting next to me when I was reading one of these books and he said, 'Paddy, you can spend all day, every day, for 10 years studying India and Indians, and you will never understand either India or Indians.' In hindsight, that rings so true. Now, as a foreigner, even though I do know something about India and Indians, I know there is three or four layers beneath that I don't understand. It's nice. It keeps me humble because I definitely know that I don't know.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** You have spoken about M S Dhoni quite a lot in the book. Can you tell us about your observations?

He clearly has the North Indian warrior-fighter spirit in him. He also has a really clever, strategic brain, and a steely composure... He certainly is different. He is calm and composed even under extreme pressure, and that gives other players permission to be calm as well. He was given a leadership position when you still had Sachin

Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, VVS Laxman, Virender Sehwag in the team... He was just really smart in his leadership, even though he was slightly junior.

**ANDREW AMSAN:** How does a coach handle pressure?

The more important we make the 'result' in our head, the more pressure we feel. It's because it is attached to our ego or self-worth. So if I do well in an important game, I look good and I feel good and people say nice things about me. If I broke down, that's lack of self-esteem. But self-esteem is knowing that I am okay regardless of whether I succeed or fail. I know deep within myself, I'm okay as a person.

**AJAY SHANKAR:** Gary Kirsten got most of the praise for the Indian team's performance. Did you feel emotionally vulnerable then?

I made the biggest mistake of my professional life then, but I wouldn't say it was my most vulnerable time. The most vulnerable time would be when one is losing. That time with the Indian team led to my biggest ever professional era. But my family and friends from home were phoning me and saying that the Indian team is doing so well and Gary is getting all the credit. I remember telling myself at the time that my job is to do a good job, not get credit. But there was a little part of me, which was my ego, that would have liked to get some credit, some publicity.

Eighteen months into my tenure, we had gone to South Africa to play the Champions Trophy with a surging Indian cricket team. It was an opportunity to really put our work on display. We had come up with some nice glossy folders that had some really cool information I had given the players. One of the things was my research around the impact of sex on performance and testosterone. I looked at it from a Chinese medical perspective, different religious perspectives, a number of different angles... It was a fascinating body of research. But I know players don't read three pages of research and so I put a lot of tongue-in-cheek stuff in the article. It was funny stuff just to keep the players interested... I had cracked a few jokes. The document was printed at a printer's office, it went to the BCCI, the team manager... then given to the players. It could have been leaked from anywhere. That's how I justify it to myself... There was a journalist whom I knew who was a fan of my work. I thought I will leak it to him and he would write

about the fantastic work that Paddy Upton had been doing behind the scenes in this revived cricket team. He did write a really good article, except that some of my tongue-in-cheek comments were taken out of context. When I woke up the next morning and turned my phone on, it went on beeping. I knew there was something wrong. I turned on the TV and I saw all the channels running a story that Gary Kirsten suggests that Indian cricketers have sex before games to improve their performance....

We arrived for training that morning... I don't quite remember what he said, because every word was like an arrow through my heart... He said somebody has leaked this document, it has affected our team and it was absolutely unacceptable... Whatever he said was very emotionally charged. I was just shrinking, because I was the guy who had leaked it so that I could get some recognition for myself. Later, I told him (that I leaked it) and explained why I had done it. Gary had got to the point that he was ready to resign if the BCCI needed a scapegoat. So, in looking for attention, recognition for myself, I ended up hurting a friend of 20 years, and someone I had spent 18 months with building a team... It had damaged the Indian cricket team's reputation, Gary's reputation... I did that because I acted out of ego. It was my worst ever professional experience, one of my biggest ever mistakes. It is a very strong reminder that it is not about me as coach. It's about serving the people that I am charged to serve in my leadership position.

**SANDEEP DWIVEDI:** You have said that parents need to lay off young players because they put a lot of pressure on them. Can you elaborate?

In the United States, 14 million kids start playing sports when they start school. By the age of 13, 70% give it up. One reason for this is parents, the other is coaches... The kids give up because they stop enjoying it. So parents and coaches have got to back off. Also, kids need to be playing two, if not three sports. The transfer of skills and the brain stimulation that happens sets them up for long-term success. Another thing that has been proven, not in India though, is that success up to the age of 13 has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on how successful someone will be by the age of 18. So if your kid is a superstar anytime up to the age of 13, it means nothing statistically.



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