THE SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Building Teams that Outperform, Year after Year

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"Victory awaits him who has everything in order—luck, people call it."

Roald Amundsen, the South Pole (1912)[1]

Every successful sports team has an on-the-field game plan, a series of plays and strategies they execute to score, to defend, and, most importantly, to win. In exactly the same way, teams themselves need a game plan, a series of plays and strategies they execute before they ever reach the field—in other words, a game plan to be successful as a team. To leave to chance what happens in the locker room and the many off-field activities that athletes and teams engage in would be just as unsuccessful as leaving the activities on the field to chance. Gut, guile, and experience alone can lead to occasional success but sustained success requires a far more systemic approach. Yet many teams focus primarily on drawing up game plans and end up wondering why the talent and ability of their players fails to emerge or reach its full potential.

To think of this another way—in the earliest part of the 20th century, sport was largely an amateur endeavor. Athletes competed as a hobby more than anything else, and no matter how dedicated to the sport they were, it was secondary—it was rarely a full-time job. In fact, athletes who trained full time were considered doing something akin to "cheating." As historian Benjamin G. Rader explained, "Those athletes who exhibited the greatest skills without apparent training and the least physical exertion received the highest accolades."[2] Training consisted largely of playing the sport itself, and not much more.

That slowly changed by mid-century as the science of training emerged. Soon, training programs designed to systematically strengthen the body, to target complementary muscle groups, to build endurance in deliberate and planned ways took over, and world records began to fall regularly. Sports training had fundamentally

shifted from an ad hoc approach to a planned and designed approach, and the results were astonishing.

The same shift must now take place at the team level. While on-field planning has been practiced for many years resulting in ever-improving play on the field, a larger systemic approach that includes the locker room, off-field activities, and the internal team dynamic is required to produce the best performance from a team, year after year. Unless the team itself is in full alignment throughout the playing season, the team will simply not reach its full potential.

In other words, a team that attempts to compete without establishing the overall expectations for every single participant—the overall goals of the team members; the level of commitment; the way conflict will be handled; the roles and responsibilities everyone is accountable for; the rules everyone affiliated with the team will need to follow—is a team without an "internal playbook" that will not be able to compete effectively. While individual talent may shine through now and then, the team itself will spend much of its energy and time pulling in different directions, once again reverting to some level of Chaos.

The Sports Performance Playbook is the roadmap for the team itself. These steps and strategies are the Xs and Os for every team before they reach the field of play. This is the process that sets the team up to focus and deliver all its talent and ability onto the field without confusion or distraction. This is the plan that takes a team from Chaos to Repeatability. And after Repeatability has been ingrained and achieved, the Playbook can also lead a team to Peak Performance.

For starters, though, we need to understand the foundational elements of successful teams.

Three pillars of sport success

There are three core elements, or "pillars," that success in sport is based on. Successful teams have learned that their primary goal is to nurture and develop all three of these pillars.

Pillar #1: Talent

Athletic talent is the first foundational element of success in sports. Players and coaches must have the core skills and abilities for their chosen sport to be successful. There are two parts to talent: physical abilities and mental abilities. Both are necessary.

Physically, every sport and game requires a particular skill set. In some, hand–eye coordination rises to the top of the list (such as tennis, golf, baseball, and basketball), in others strength (football and hockey), in yet others endurance (soccer, distance running). Most sports require multiple skill sets. To excel, athletes, coaches, and trainers continuously learn and develop new ways to condition, strengthen, and practice to maximize the talent in each player. Tiger Woods, for example, revolutionized golf by bringing strength training to a sport traditionally seen as

predominantly a hand–eye coordination game. Jerry Rice brought incredible hand–eye coordination to a role in football typically associated with speed and agility.

The mental side of talent has been expanded and developed more in the last 30 years than ever before. Mental abilities, or "neck-up" competencies, now receive great attention in sports. Almost all elite athletes now have sports psychologists to help them learn mental focus, and to learn and develop mental patterns that produce Peak Performance while identifying and avoiding mental patterns that detract from success. In addition, new technologies by companies such as Axon Sports have demonstrated how athletes can train and develop critical mental skills such as pattern recognition, reaction time, and decision-making under pressure in novel and powerful ways.

Talent, however, is not the focus of this book. Talent is an essential ingredient to any sporting success, but it is not by far the only ingredient, nor even the most important one in many cases. As noted in the Introduction, history is littered with talented players and teams that failed to perform. And the reason is that the other two ingredients, the other two pillars, are often ignored or neglected. While recognizing that talent is necessary, it is also important to recognize that the current approach to sports already has a strong, if not overly strong, focus on talent, and we trust that will continue.

Pillar #2: Character and motivation

The second pillar is character, the intrinsic disposition of each individual on the team. Character is individual, and each of us has personal, non-cognitive character traits that greatly influence how we apply our talent, how hard we work, why we work, and what we want out of our sport at the end of the day.

A part of an athlete's character is motivation. For example, there are many talented players who lack "work ethic," and they fail to practice and develop their talent. There are also many who lack "natural talent," but simply, through hard and intelligent work, become high-level athletes, if not superstars. Of course, some level of talent is always needed, but without the motivation and disposition to develop it, talent will not go far.

As we will explore in more detail in Chapter 4, it is critical to understand individual characteristics around learning styles and communication styles so that talent can be most effectively deployed and used on the field. Some players thrive on confrontation from teammates and coaches, and others simply shut down. Understanding individual dispositions and character traits is critical to maximizing the use and development of talent.

Pillar #3: Culture

The third pillar is the culture of the team. There is a great deal of talk about "team culture," and rightly so, but culture is often misunderstood or turned into a mysterious or magical substance that happens of its own accord, somehow.

Culture is actually quite simple, and can be defined this way: culture is simply "*the way we do things around here.*" In other words, culture is the behavioral expression of our mission, vision, and values as we attempt to achieve our goals. It's what we actually do day-to-day when we practice, play the game, work together, and try to win.

Team culture is one of the most powerful ingredients in sports success. A team may have raw talent, they may even have good understanding of the players' characteristics and motivations, but if the team culture does not promote hard work, teamwork, and an environment the players want to engage with, very little success will happen on the field. Team culture, team direction, team values, and common goals are critical to harnessing the talent and character of every player toward success.

A simple way of bringing these together is shown in Figure 2.1, where Team Culture on the bottom of the triangle supports the development of Talent, as well as the engagement and development of individual Character on the team.
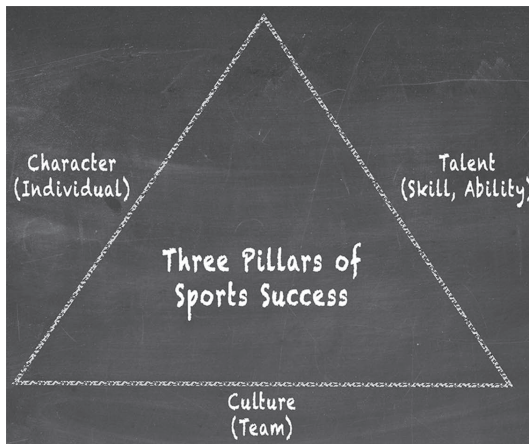

FIGURE 2.1 Three pillars of sports success

In addition to understanding and developing all three pillars, it's important to understand what can be developed on an individual basis, and what is team-based and must be done collectively.

In Figure 2.2, we see that Culture, by definition, is team based, and must be developed as a group. Character is individual, and must be understood individually before being integrated into the group. And Talent is both; skill and ability, both physical and mental, must be developed according to the gifts and limitations of each individual first, followed by fitting the various skills and abilities together successfully as a team.

If successful teams are teams that find a way to create a team culture that supports and nurtures both talent and character, then the overriding question becomes, "How is this done?" This book, put simply, is that "how." This book is the roadmap to building, developing, and aligning all three pillars for every team, whether Little League, college, or professional.
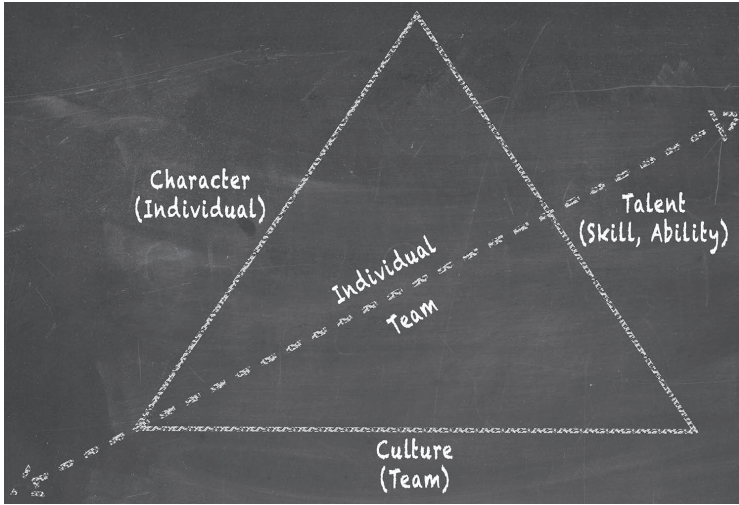
FIGURE 2.2 Individual vs. team

The Sports Playbook—four steps that lead to a successful team

The Sports Playbook consists of four steps that every successful team has executed and implemented, in one form or another. Each step defines a simple idea that each team must accomplish to be successful, in both the short term and the long term. In addition, within each step there are a number of tools to help a team get there, given their specific level of play and context. As is often true, there are many roads that lead to Rome, and teams can take different routes and use various tools to achieve their goals. The tools themselves are meant to be flexible and need to be adapted to each situation. We have identified, within each step, the foundational tools that teams must employ to build Repeatability, along with advanced tools for teams to move from Repeatability all the way to Peak Performance. But the goal and objective of each step must be met if the team is to have the framework for sustained success in place. Below we'll give you an overview of each step to help identify what part of the foundation for a successful team that particular part of the Playbook builds. In the following chapters, we'll go into great depth on each step, along with the tools that can be used and applied. Along the way, we will introduce well-known sports institutions and athletes and tell their story, their successes and failures, through the framework of *The Sports Playbook*.

Step One: Establishing team culture

Culture, as we said, is "the way we do things around here." Successful teams ensure that everyone on the team, whatever they are doing, are contributing constructively

toward the same goals and objectives, living similar values, and are all pulling in the same direction. In other words, the culture on the team is what organizes and directs all of the talent, ability, and energy toward team success. Culture is the most important framework for the team to design and establish early on.

The first step of every successful team, therefore, is establishing a team culture that will create Repeatability, and potentially lead to Peak Performance. This is what is often called a "winning culture," since only through strong culture will success be regularly achieved.

Sounds simple. It even seems obvious. When 35 student athletes show up for the first practice of a Division 1 water polo team, it's obvious that they're all there to play the game, right? And playing the game means they're all there to help the team win. They must already have bought into a winning culture, right?

In reality, the answer, at best, is "maybe, but probably not."

Here are a few questions to consider. How many are really there to help the team win, first and foremost? How many are there simply for the excitement of being on a college team? How many are there to impress the girls . . . or boys? How many are there simply to demonstrate their skill and get scouted for a berth on the Olympic water polo team in two years? How many are there for their ego, to show they are better than everyone else on the team? How many are there because their parents expect them to be? Do they all have the same work ethic, and the same expectations around commitment to the team and what it means? How many of the assistant coaches are really there to "try out" for a head coaching job elsewhere? If this is a women's team, is the administrator really just interested in meeting Title IX obligations? Is the administrator using the team solely as a way to raise funds for the athletic department?

The list of possible motivations for every athlete, coach, administrator, and even for every fan, is endless. One of the most common and most destructive assumptions made in sports is that everyone has the same motivation for being there, that everyone has the same expectations for "how we do things around here." One of the most common failures on teams is called "mixed motive" failures, where there are competing motives at play on the field that end up defeating the team long before they meet an opponent. Ram's quarterback Tony Banks, for example, made it clear that as the starting quarterback, he was free to do what he wanted, whether the team liked it or not. His personal motives were clearly not aligned with the team's (see box below).

> (In 1997), quarterback Tony Banks has brought his six-month-old Rottweiler, Felony, to camp. "She's like my daughter," Banks says, beaming. The coaches do not beam. Dogs are not allowed in dormitories at training camp. Banks has committed only a training-camp misdemeanor, but Felony must go.

Banks, 24, could be a problem for (new coach Dick) Vermeil. Banks' response to the hiring of the coach and his elderly assistants was, "Why are they bringing the dinosaurs back?" A second-round pick in 1996, Banks won the starting job in his rookie year and performed so well that the Rams decided not to chase free-agent quarterback Jeff George in the 1997 off-season. But Vermeil is concerned that football isn't as important to Banks as it should be. Exhibit A: Banks blew a $25,000 bonus (his base salary is $300,000, lowest among NFL full-season starting quarterbacks) by not attending at least 50% of the Rams' off-season workouts. The weightlifting, he said, was messing up his basketball game. "Nobody's gonna stop me from playing basketball," he says. "Nobody."

"Return Man," by Peter King, *Sports Illustrated*, December 29, 1997.
www.si.com/vault/1997/12/29/236727/return-man-si-
followed-dick-vermeil-through-his-first-season-as-the-rams-
coach-here-is-an-inside-look-at-his-nfl-encore#

Beyond motivations, is there both understanding and agreement on how the team itself will be set up and run, and what is expected from everyone on the team? Is this a militaristic approach where players do everything they are told and *only* what they're told? Do players compete just as hard against each other as they do their opponent? Is this a "one for all!" culture, or an "everyone for themselves" kind of place? Is this an individualistic culture where each individual is only responsible for themselves and their performance, letting the coaches deal with other players? Is this a collective culture where support and help is owed between players? Also, are the roles and responsibilities clear? Do players know and accept the coaching style and approach?

The unfortunate reality is this—teams *almost never* have a common or accepted culture at the beginning. At least not by default, not automatically. Team culture and acceptance of that culture must be discussed, created, crafted, and sustained. Culture and expectations must be drawn into the open, and questioned. Establishing culture is a team requirement that is more important than any of the physical skills of strength, conditioning, or even talent.

Culture, fundamentally, is common purpose at many levels, and culture is what makes an effective team more than the sum of its parts. When everyone buys into "the way we do things around here," the result is what most people refer to as "teamwork," and on one level it is. But it is important to understand that teamwork on the field is really the *outcome* of a well-established team culture, not the cause. Teamwork can only blossom when everyone on the team is pulling in the same direction, knows and is committed to the same goals and

objectives, and knows, deeply, that their teammates are on board with the same mission, vision, and goals as they are.

A recent example of successfully establishing culture is the German national soccer team over the last 15 years. Germany had been one of the most successful soccer-playing nations between 1954 and 1996. They won the World Cup three times, appeared in the final another three, and never failed to reach the quarterfinals. During this period they also won the European Championship three times and appeared in the final on two other occasions. However, after an indifferent run to the quarterfinals in the 1998 World Cup and a dismal showing in the 2000 European Championships, the governing body of German soccer, the Deutscher Fussball–Bund (DFB), decided their entire system needed to be overhauled. After an exhaustive global best practices study, they updated their tactical approach for the first time since the early 1970s, placing an emphasis on modernizing their conditioning program, playing a high-pressure game, and developing skillful players. The DFB effectively mandated that the clubs standardize the core components of these changes, especially at the youth level, and encouraged clubs to promote and play German players rather than foreigners. The results were impressive. Germany produced its best generation of players since the 1970s, winning the nation's first World Cup since 1990, and the popularity of the domestic league, the Bundesliga, skyrocketed. The DFB's successful overhaul had established a new soccer culture, a new "way that soccer is done here," that has demonstrated Peak Performance year after year since, culminating in the World Cup in 2014.[3]

Another key part of culture on a team is in establishing the rules of engagement on the team, the boundaries for the team. In every context of human life, there are boundaries that we follow, and there are sanctions for people who violate those boundaries. The goal is to have players embrace team rules, rather than just comply with them, but that cannot be achieved without a clearly defined process that lays out enforcement roles and the consequences for rule breaking. In establishing an effective team culture, all team members must know exactly what is expected and why. And finally, they have to buy into them.

So how does a team establish a winning culture? Fundamentally, there are two approaches. The most common approach is to create a "High Power-Gap" culture[4] with an autocratic coach, a taskmaster who sets the rules and demands total allegiance. Often referred to as "coaches' prerogative," these kinds of coaches usually rule with an iron fist, directing every action and behavior of every player so that unity is achieved and followed, without question.

Consider, for example, the unique culture coach Bobby Knight established during his tenure at Indiana University. Knight deliberately established the High Power-Gap culture he wanted, start to finish.

Knight's ultimate goal was not just to win basketball games. "I'm sure I'd be easier on myself and on other people if just winning were my ultimate objective."[5] His goal was to instill the kind of discipline and toughness that will lead to success on the court, in the classroom, and later in life.

How he achieved these goals was very specific. His players, and assistant coaches,[6] had to be prepared to endure his autocratic coaching methods. He believed that fear was the best motivator. As biographer John Feinstein explained, "He believes that if the players are afraid of getting screamed at or of landing in the doghouse, they will play better. And if they fear him more than the opponent, they are likely to play better."[7] As Knight explained to Steve Alford, perhaps the best shooter he ever coached: "Don't think I didn't notice the points. But I don't talk about what's good—I talk about what's bad. I know you can shoot."[8]

Knight led Indiana to great success, including three national titles. To make his approach work, he recruited players who were disciplined and tough, and who were usually capable of reacting constructively to his harsh teaching methods. According to Feinstein, he tried to be very honest with recruits about what they should expect. "If he wants a player he tells him why; he tells him what his role can be if he comes . . . and if he does come . . . it will be the hardest place in the country to play. Very straightforward. You will go to class or you will not play. You will get yelled at. You will graduate. And you will become a better basketball player."[9] Knight described the culture he wanted, and then went out and created it.

> "Most people, they hear the word discipline, and right away they think about a whip and a chair. I've worked up my own definition. And this took a long time. Discipline: doing what you have to do, and doing it as well as you possibly can, and doing it that way all the time."
>
> Bobby Knight, in Frank Deford, "The Rabbit Hunter."
> The Rabbit Hunter," *Sports Illustrated*, January 26, 1981.
> We are tempted to add a fourth requirement:
> without complaining.

The New Zealand All Blacks rugby team has created the closest thing to the opposite culture, an extremely "Low Power-Gap" culture.

The scenes that unfold immediately after the All Blacks win a rugby match is typical of many teams: the players and coaches celebrate; drinks flow while family, politicians, and sponsors mill around the locker room ("sheds") to join the celebration, and the press asks questions.

What happens when everyone else leaves is what makes the All Blacks unique. Equality reigns. Each player and member of the coaching staff is given a chance to evaluate the match, offering views about what went well or needs improvement, regardless of whether the All Blacks lose or win (or, as is often the case, win by a wide margin). Then most of the team departs, except for two senior players, who pick up brooms and begin to sweep and clean up the sheds.

According to James Kerr, the author of *Legacy: 15 Lessons in Leadership*, which explores the culture the All Blacks have created, they believe tidying up after

themselves reinforces humility and a sense of ownership: "It's not expecting somebody else to do your job for you. It teaches you not to expect things to be handed to you."[10] The idea of star players doing the most unglamorous of jobs seems, both literally and figuratively, quite foreign to North Americans or indeed most other cultures, but not to New Zealanders. In fact, according to Kerr, "humility is deeply ingrained in Māori and broader Polynesian culture and, indeed, the word Māori implies 'normal' or 'natural' to distinguish the people of the land from the gods above. To 'get above yourself' is deeply frowned upon in this culture, and more broadly in New Zealand society."[11]

After a run of poor results in 2004, then head coach Graham Henry and the rest of the management team decided to turn over a great deal of the practical responsibility to the players. Leadership groups were formed to take responsibility for on-field planning and strategy, running practices, organizing social events including mentoring new players, and community relations. "The management always felt," explained Henry, "that they had to transfer the leadership from senior management to the players . . . they play the game and they have to do the leading on the field. The traditional 'you and them' became 'us'."[12]

To be clear, there is no "right" or "wrong" culture—many different kinds of culture can support sustained performance in sports, as we see by Knight's success, as well as the All Blacks. What is important is first that the culture is clear and understood, and secondly that everyone has bought in. A clear example of what happens when culture is forced or imposed is illustrated by the tumultuous history of the New York Yankees.

Yankees' owner George Steinbrenner's demanding but capricious leadership style often led to public spats with his managers and players (and even the league itself). This approach, along with the huge money that Steinbrenner poured into the Yankees, brought some success through 1981. However, such success could not be sustained on the field with so much friction in the organization. In fact, between 1982 and 1993, the owner known as the Boss raced through 12 different managers, and between 1983 and 1988 he hired and fired the combustible Billy Martin three times and Lou Pinella twice. He also changed general managers ten times. The most fabled franchise in American sports did not qualify for the playoffs even once during that 12-year period. Matters only improved after Steinbrenner was suspended from baseball, and he was left with little choice but to let his team manager and general manager build a strong team culture. The result was four World Series triumphs and two other Fall Classic appearances between 1996 and 2003.

While an autocratic culture can bring short-term success, it can fail in a number of ways. First, this approach presumes the coach indeed has the power to control athlete behavior (or the owner has the power to control the coach), both on and off the field. While monitoring on-field behavior is relatively easy, off-field behavior often cannot be controlled autocratically and there is a tendency to ignore it unless overt problems arise. In addition, in professional sports with high-paid athletes and coaches, this approach rarely works—athletes who feel they are treated in a heavy-handed fashion often rebel, causing far more disunity than common culture.

Even a coach respected and feared as much as Paul "Bear" Bryant learned there were limits to how much authority he could exercise. Prior to the 1972 Orange Bowl, which pitted Bryant's number two ranked Alabama against number one ranked Nebraska, Bryant set curfews that ranged between 11:30 and 12:30. Most of the players social activities were planned and supervised, but 37 of them broke curfew the one night they were free to explore Miami. Starting fullback Ellis Beck thought the curfews and planning were hurting the team:

> "We were down here to win a championship, but the game was six days away. This was supposed to be a reward for winning and now, all of a sudden, we're playing for all the marbles, and everything was so uptight. Everybody just needed to get away from the hotel and blow off some steam."[13]

Bryant wanted to send all 37 players back to Tuscaloosa, but that just was not a viable solution. He couldn't even confront them because doing so without suspending them would have undermined his reputation for uncompromising discipline. Instead Jim Goosetree, the assistant coach who caught the players, told them that he had decided not to inform Bryant and warned them not to let it happen again.

Managers who feel they lack the authority to run the team often depart—as evidenced by Jim Harbaugh leaving the San Francisco 49ers in 2015 after three stunningly successful seasons because of disagreements with the front office. Even at the college level, social norms toward authority are changing, and today's student-athletes often reject, or underperform, when coached through an autocratic culture.

As Clemson's football coach Dabo Swinney explained, "Anybody can get up there and tell them what to do. If you can't articulate why you need to do it, they won't listen. It's a different world. If my coach told me to go run them bleachers, you didn't ask no questions. I turned around and started running until he said stop. Now they'll still run bleachers, but you better be able to tell them why."[14]

There is another way to approach culture that is significantly different from the purely autocratic approach. This involves establishing team culture by engaging the team as a whole, with the goal of achieving voluntary agreement and commitment to the team's goals and objectives. With voluntary commitment to the team culture, the true benefits of everyone pulling in the same direction multiply quickly:

- Athletes demonstrate commitment and engagement, not just compliance.
- Athletes follow team rules not through fear of being caught, but because of their commitment to the team's vision and goals, integrating off-field behavior with team commitments.
- Athletes not following team rules are sanctioned, in essence, by the whole team, creating peer pressure to follow team culture, something far more potent than relying on "coaches' prerogative."

- Team members monitor their own and other members' behavior, creating a holistic "team support" approach.
- Team members are motivated toward larger team goals, rather than individual-istic goals.

However the team's culture is established, it is an essential first step for every team on all levels—athlete, team, coaching staff, and administrators. Chapter 3 will go into depth on the tools and approaches teams and coaches can use to effectively establish a winning team culture.

Step Two: Creating individual alignment with team culture

Once there is a clear understanding of the team's culture, a clear understanding of the mission, vision, and values for the team, there needs to be tangible ways to engage every individual affiliated with the team in being aligned to that culture. Most destructive conflict, most cases of wasted or misapplied talent, result from a lack of alignment between the team culture, and the character or disposition of the individuals who make up the team.

For a given student-athlete, for example, what is her vision for her school years? Are athletics the primary goal, with academics second? Is the team what the athlete lives for, or is it a secondary influence? What are her goals in her personal life, and how does that connect to the team? For professional athletes, what is their goal this season? Are they a hired gun brought in at the trade deadline for this one season, for this playoff run? Are they here for the long haul? Often, teams with clearly established team cultures can help individual athletes become better aligned to that culture. Even where there are disparate individual motivators, there are clear opportunities for bringing those individuals into alignment with the team at the point where the rubber meets the road—behavior.

Once team culture is established and once everyone on the team from the administrator to the coach to the equipment assistant has personally bought into the vision and culture, the next step is identifying what everyone is accountable for, what role they play, and what is expected of them individually on the team. This step assesses individual character and dispositions, and integrates them into the team's goals and objectives. Every team is unique, and in this context it means every team must find a unique way of aligning each individual into the culture and direction of the team.

Pete Carroll of the Seattle Seahawks makes a great effort to identify players who do not require a disciplinarian to be motivated—Carroll builds a Low Power-Gap culture[15] on his teams. Consistent with this culture, Carroll installed an attacking style of play that maximizes individual freedom and is, well, fun. "It's just, 'Go!'" noted one of his defensive players. "We fly around, chase the ball, pressure the passer. It's the way everybody wants to play on defense."[16] The final part of the puzzle is to understand each player's needs and focus on their strengths, rather than harping on their weaknesses.[17]

Seahawks' staff keenly understand that motivation may take many forms for various athletes. They do not believe that every athlete must "love the game" but, rather, they work hard to understand what motivates each specific athlete and help make connections between that motivator and the required tasks necessary for the individual to contribute to the team's success. For example, if a player is motivated to provide financial stability to their family, then showing them a clear plan on what role can both achieve that and serve the team can help to create critical alignment and set the stage for the specific behaviors required.[18]

Some of the challenges and barriers to creating individual alignment are caused simply by the unique mix of talent each team has. For example, a particular basketball team may be deep with agile point guards and power forwards but lack outside shooting. Another team may have strong outside shooting but lack players who can drive to the basket. Each team, therefore, must assess the strengths and weaknesses of their particular team, then build an approach that leads with their particular strengths and mitigates their particular weaknesses. Classically, talent, and managing that talent, is what coaching is primarily focused on.

Beyond issues of identifying and developing talent, however, effective teams need to identify very clearly the roles and responsibilities for each player, coach, and even administrator to ensure absolute clarity and focus for all members of the team. For example, who has accountability for the locker room? On some teams, the coach establishes expectations for every aspect of team behavior across the board—including what happens in the locker room. If so, what is the role of the team captain? Is this an honorary title, or is the captain expected to resolve conflicts between players directly? Who is accountable for off-field behavior? Who monitors and addresses breaches of team rules? How is success and failure assessed?

More broadly, what are the boundaries on the team, and what happens when transgressions occur? Who holds team members accountable and how clear is that accountability? What are the consequences for violating these expectations? Danny Manning, the marquee player for the 1988 Kansas basketball team, learned the hard way that leadership from him was expected on the team (see box below).

In 1988 Kansas won the NCAA men's basketball title. Danny Manning was the star of the team, but the key moment in the season might have occurred in February when he fully assumed a leadership role. A fight broke out in the locker room. Coach Larry Brown was furious that Manning had not already intervened: "You sit there and watch like one of the guys. Goddamn it, when are you going to realize that you're *not* one of the guys!"

A Season Inside: One Year in College Basketball by John Feinstein, Villard (1988), Kindle edition, location 137.

Finally, in effectively implementing any plan, a key component is risk analysis. No organization or team has infinite time and energy available to apply to each and every concern that is identified. So how is time and focus allocated? The most effective way to bring focus and prioritization is through assessing the risks associated with both doing or not doing something, and responding accordingly. Off-field behavior is a clear example. If a team ignores, or chooses to not set boundaries for off-field behavior, what are the risks? Many teams have simply decided that it is too time-consuming and too much effort to set expectations for athlete's behavior on their own time. But what is the risk to this approach?

In 2007, the Atlanta Falcons (indeed the whole NFL) paid little attention to their athletes' off-field activities, or to their player's disposition or character. Then, the Michael Vick episode happened. A team who had bet their franchise on one star player found themselves scrambling to change the entire team's focus, all due to off-field behavior that landed Vick in federal prison for over two years for his involvement in a dogfighting ring. The Falcons not only lost their franchise player, they had a public relations nightmare to boot.[19] More recently, the New England Patriots signed Aaron Hernandez knowing there were off-field concerns and chose to draft him anyway, hoping that they could surround him with positive leaders and mitigate the risk from his off-field tendencies. For two years, they seemed to have won the gamble. Then Hernandez was arrested, charged, and convicted of homicide and the Patriots were left with a PR disaster, a hole in the roster, salary cap constraints, and substantial financial losses.[20] Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens became the poster child for off-field behavior and spousal abuse that got him cut from the team, and left Baltimore without a star running back.[21]

The first two steps in the Playbook are the steps that lay the groundwork for every team to move out of Chaos, and strongly into the Repeatability phase. And Step Two is what brings the decisions made when establishing team culture down into the day-to-day operation of the team, creating a focused, clear approach to implementing the goals and objectives agreed to by all members of the team during that first step.

Step Three: Restoring alignment through effective issue resolution

No matter how effective a team is at establishing culture and solid processes for aligning the individuals with that culture, issues will arise. Parts of the plan may simply not be working, players thought to be starters may not be performing, some players may feel that they're treated too harshly by one of the coaches, conflict between two key players may erupt. The unexpected happens, the plan needs to be changed, and change can cause conflict. Now what?

Even in the best case, where team members and coaches are giving 110 percent, where there are high levels of effort and commitment, differing points of view and

clashes of ideas will arise. Conflict generates a great deal of energy, which takes teams into one of two profoundly different directions—either the team channels this energy into greater achievement and to the Peak Performance level, or it leads a team on a descent into in-fighting and back to Chaos. This energy either drives a team forward toward greater success and learning, or it turns inward and damages the core relationships on the team.

Step Three is the creation of a clear, well-designed Issue Resolution Process that is established and agreed to at the beginning of the season. It is a team's safety net that captures the negative side of conflict and gives it a clear path toward resolution as early as possible, restoring alignment within the team's culture.

Take the Miami Dolphins of 2013 who lost key players and any chance of success in the season when a pattern of bullying behavior led by Richie Incognito targeted teammate Jonathan Martin. When an investigative report was released that included a series of vulgar, sexualized text messages, the incident transcended the Miami Dolphins and the NFL and became a national topic of bad behavior and workplace safety. The insular culture of the Dolphins' locker room forced Martin into a choice of accepting the harassment or leaving his profession— he had no other options for addressing this. Ultimately, he chose to reveal the details and leave, but why should such a choice be necessary? Martin had nowhere to go and the issue divided the coaching staff and the players. The end result— performance dropped as the energy and focus turned inward on the team itself, instead of quickly addressing the issue and making the team even stronger.

In this case, the first failure was a lack of clarity on team roles and responsibilities—who is responsible for addressing player behavior? The head coach didn't think it was him—his first response was, "I don't run the locker room." Which begs the question—who does? Secondly, what was the issue resolution "system" for Martin to turn to when this level of conflict arose? There was no system in place, the situation spiraled out of control and ended up in the media, damaging everyone on the team.

Contrast this with a team like the Seattle Seahawks who have developed a system for addressing issues that allows players to get guidance and support on just about anything they have a concern or problem with. This can range from team concerns, as well as any issue off-field as well. The coaching staff and players attribute much of their success (including a 2014 Super Bowl victory and a trip back to the Super Bowl in 2015) to this ability to identify and solve problems early.[22]

Conflict is one of the most frightening aspects of human relationships. Our natural tendency is toward fight or flight—and both options typically lead to poor outcomes. On the fight side, it leads to division, to taking sides, and to expending time and energy internally that damages the team itself. On the flight side, it leads to withdrawal, lack of connection, and key members of the team leaving or checking out rather than staying to work through the issues. Both approaches drain focus and effectiveness from teams.

By creating and agreeing a specific, clear process that addresses issues quickly, by gaining commitment from everyone upfront to put issues on the table, issue resolution becomes a normal part of the team process that is handled well. What could have been damaging to the team now turns into an effective team-building experience. Nothing goes under the carpet—everything is addressed productively.

Teams that encourage issue resolution processes effectively channel that energy back into team success, and not into intra-team friction.

Step Four: Sustaining success—improving into the future

Step Four is probably the simplest of the four steps—capturing the learnings from the current team or season, and leveraging those learnings into the future, for the next team or season.

Much has been written about "reflective practice," about the value of reviewing the successes and failures that took place during the season and making adjustments for the next time around. In essence, it is only reflective practice that takes a team from the Repeatability Stage, where practices are purposeful, to the Peak Performance Stage, where the best practices, the practices that lead to sustained success, are repeated and improved upon, year after year.

Reflective practice, of course, is scalable—it isn't reserved solely for end-of-season learnings. Good teams reflect after each game, after each practice, even after each quarter or half, and make adjustments appropriate to success. Step Four is unique, however, in that it ensures the team will review successes and failures on a larger level, on a full season of experience, directly with the team members that lived it.

The learnings from Step Four are then used when the new team and the new season starts, to inform and improve Step One—establishing team culture. What goals and objectives helped focus the team? Were they motivating, or were they
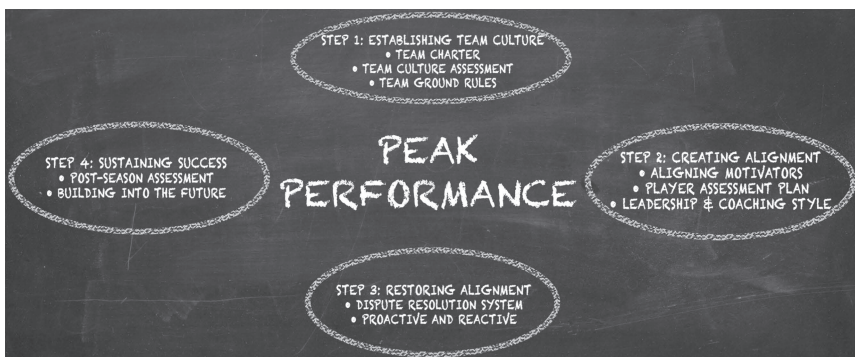

FIGURE 2.3 Each step in the Playbook helps focus the team toward Peak Performance

ignored? How were they set—top-down by the coaching staff, or by engaging the players, the administrators? Was the team mission clear and engaging?

By feeding the learnings from the previous season and team into the start of the next one, the new team will have a stronger and clearer culture, and the tools for aligning everyone into the culture in the new season will be far more effective.

The Houston Rockets managed to qualify for the 2016 NBA playoffs. However, their 41–41 record and first round elimination compared poorly with the previous season, when they won 56 regular season games and advanced all the way to the Western Conference finals. Star guard James Harden still managed to author his most prolific statistical season to date and also helped his teammates achieve some career bests (e.g. Dwight Howard converted more than 60 percent of his field goals for the first time), but the Rockets' defense was awful.

According to *Sports Illustrated*'s Lee Jenkins,[23] Harden and the front office both realized that much needed to change before the 2016–17 season. General Manager Daryl Morey started by looking for a coach who could address the Rockets' defensive shortcomings, but soon concluded that maximizing his team' strength, which revolved around Harden's game, was more important that focusing on minimizing their weaknesses: "Let's not put a boat anchor on Secretariat. Let's double down."[24] The new coach that was hired, Mike D'Antoni, brought experience and an up tempo, spread-the-court, "small ball" offensive philosophy ideally suited for Harden. Morey then traded or released Howard and three other teammates, replacing them with players who were committed to playing roles that supported Harden.

And, perhaps most importantly, D'Antoni met and broke down film with Harden, convincing him to change positions and become a point guard. D'Antoni was relieved to discover that his star player was a willing and eager pupil: "I can actually coach instead of convince."[25] Harden agreed: "This is probably what I should have been doing all along."[26]

The team learned from its previous season's successes and failures, and made the changes necessary. The result was an MVP-caliber season for Harden—he increased his point per game average, led the NBA in assists, and scored or assisted on 50 percent of the Rockets' points. More importantly, the Rockets finished with a 55–27 record and advanced to the quarterfinals of the playoffs.

Summary

The goals and objectives of *The Sports Playbook* have been outlined above as best practices that will create an ongoing blueprint for sustained success, at all levels of sport. The Playbook then becomes a cycle of success, each of the steps leading to the next, with Sustaining Success re-engaging Step One, and so on:
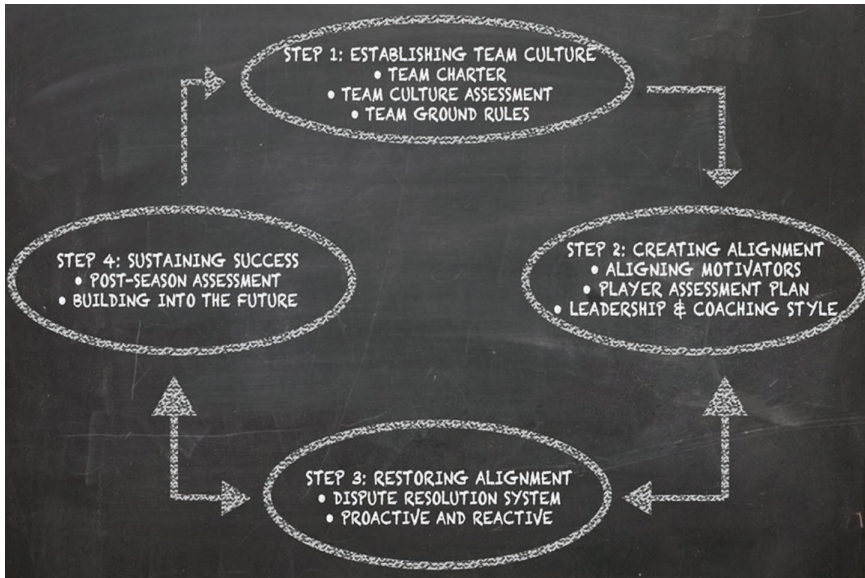
FIGURE 2.4 The Sports Playbook is a repeatable cycle of success

Each step needs, of course, to be applied appropriately to the team, the league and the level. A professional sports team, where all staff and athletes accept that winning is the defining measure of success, should spend significant time and resources applying each step in depth. In contrast, a high school baseball team should also apply each and every step, but more than likely in a much shorter, simpler way.

The four chapters that follow will go deeply into each step, and the specific tools available to teams to most effectively apply that step.

Teams have choices, and not every tool is needed for every team to accomplish the focus and clarity required. Like the many other decisions teams must make, choices need to be made. Every team does not need a coaching staff of 40 to be successful, nor does every team need an infinite budget for signing players to compete. Every team, indeed every organization in the world, faces constraints that have to be accepted and lived with. Similarly, few teams will want or even need to use every tool available within each of the steps. That said, choosing the tools that will first take their particular team to strong, Repeatable actions that lead to success, and second to the level of Peak Performance, is the roadmap, or Playbook, to success.

IDEAS FOR REVIEW: CHAPTER 2 THE SPORTS PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK

Important points

- There are three pillars for success in sports: Talent, Character, and Culture. Culture is team-based, Character is individual, and Talent is both individual and team-based.
- The four steps in the Playbook that lead to success are: 1) establishing a winning team culture, 2) creating individual alignment with that team culture, 3) restoring alignment through effective issue resolution, and 4) sustaining success - improving into the future.
- Many teams do some of those steps well, and have intermittent success. Only a very few teams do all of them well, year after year, and have sustained Peak Performance.
- There are a series of tools to help implement each of these steps.

Think about this

- Why do many teams have only limited, or sporadic, success?
- Why do seemingly talented teams only rarely meet expectations?
- Why do seemingly average teams sometimes outperform?
- In your experience, how often have you seen:
  - a clear team culture created and sustained by the coach or the players?
  - the players' goals and motivations solicited and included as part of the team's goals?
  - issues resolved effectively? When an issue arose, how was it resolved? Was it a positive or a negative resolution for you?
  - an end-of-season debrief and learning session? How often were you asked for your thoughts on what could be improved for next year?

Endnotes

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