

Clive Woodward: The Biography

Revised and Updated

Alison Kervin

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Extended Book Review by Simon Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

Sir Clive Woodward is the rugby coach who led England to victory in the 2003 Rugby World Cup, before leading the British and Irish Lions to defeat in New Zealand in 2005. He then turned to soccer coaching and spent about a year as ‘technical director’ at Southampton Football Club. In September 2006 he became the Director of Elite Performance at the British Olympic Association, but that occurred after publication of this book. This biography, based on extensive research and many interviews, was written with full cooperation from Woodward – whose autobiography [1] contains much of the same content but from a different critical perspective. The author, Alison Kervin, is a former Chief Sports Feature Writer and Rugby Editor for *The Times*. This review focuses on leadership and management issues, and draws upon Woodward [1] where appropriate or necessary. Clive Woodward was the first full-time professional coach of the England Rugby Team employed by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), and many of the issues he faced can be viewed in the context of a sport moving from amateurism to professionalism.

LEADERSHIP

Clive Woodward is viewed as both a leader and a manager. The author uses the distinction between leaders as ‘hunters’ (“looking for new things to shoot”) and managers as ‘farmers’ (“tending to what is already there”) (p. 351). She also uses the well-known distinction between transformational leaders (who “pick up an organisation by the scruff of the neck and change it”) and transactional leaders (“more about management than leadership;” “issuing instructions and monitoring performance”) (p. 351) (see [2], [3]). Kervin makes little of the latter distinction, placing more emphasis instead on the concept of ‘stealth leadership:’

Adrian Atkinson [a business psychologist] describes Clive as being ‘a stealth leader’ – a man who does not charge in like a bustling sergeant major and demand attention, but one who encourages the group to buy into his way of thinking by showing/persuading them that it will work. Stealth leaders are good at working themselves slowly into the fabric of a team and being seen as the one who has expert knowledge and the ability to change a situation for the better. (p. 347)

Woodward’s first experience as a rugby coach was at Henley RFC, where he changed the culture, the style of play and the attitude. Nigel Dudding was a player/coach at Henley when Woodward arrived:

‘He didn’t try to do everything at once, though,’ says Dudding. ‘He just phased in things. He would drop in something new, then, when the players had got that, something else new would come along. It meant the players stayed alert and fresh. He had reasonably skilful players and he got the best out of them, made them more skilful.’ (p. 143)

This concept of ‘stealth leadership’ is crucial to Kervin’s analysis of Woodward and her explanation of why he failed in the test series on the British Lions tour of New Zealand:

[Woodward] worked hard over seven years to transform the national [England] side. Then he moved on to coach the Lions – a peripatetic workforce with whom he had just ten days’ training. He raised expectations and worked to create the winning mentality but to no avail. The result was three defeats. Clive simply couldn’t play to any of his strengths. With the benefit of hindsight, he should not have taken on the role. His greatest successes have come when he had had maximum exposure to players. Clive, by his own admission, is not a charismatic, ‘charge in and make a million alterations on the first day’ sort of coach. He needs time and likes to make substantial changes to every area of the team. His greatest successes came in club rugby where he had twice-weekly access to players. (p. 15)

The following statement from Martin Johnson, England’s World Cup winning captain, is crucial to understanding Woodward’s leadership:

‘From day one,’ said Martin Johnson, ‘the team changed, the way we trained changed – suddenly everything was different. He didn’t want to do anything in the same way as it had been done before. In particular, he was desperate to get rid of the staid forward-dominated English rugby of the early nineties, although, to be fair, I think we’d done that by the time he came on board. He said, “You must never use the words ‘game plan’ – just go out and play it as it comes. Give everything a go.” It was naïve but very refreshing.’ (p. 194)

Woodward’s philosophy on style of play can be traced back to Earle Kirton, the coach of Harlequins RFC, who Woodward played for after leaving school as an 18 year-old:

While many clubs played the stick it up your jumper ten-man rugby that Clive loathes, Quins, thanks primarily to the influence of Kirton, were determined to run the ball and enjoy the sport. It was a backs-dominated club, led by a man who was ahead of his time. Clive grew to have an enormous amount of respect for Kirton. He became the first in a series of coaches who would greatly influence the way Clive played and the way he thought about rugby. Clive’s natural devil-may-care approach to the sport – running at opposition, dazzling footwork and quick thinking – were encouraged and developed by Kirton. (p. 65)

Kervin does note that Woodward was able to reflect on his preferred style of play throughout his coaching career and make a change when necessary (p. 122).

MANAGEMENT

Two days after Woodward was appointed as England Coach, he contacted a management

consultant called Humphrey Walters and asked him if he would help him look at rugby in the same way he would look at a small business. (p. 192) Clive Woodward believes that England won the World Cup “because we applied business principles to the management of a professional sport” and that “the principles found in the England story can be applied to any sport or business situation” [1, p. 412]. The ideas of Walters fitted well with those of an Australian dentist called Paddi Lund, another ‘guru’ who had influenced Woodward and who devised the theory of ‘critical non-essentials’ (“those things that are outside the core of the business but add such value to it that they are critical to the business’ success”) (p. 164). In his autobiography, Woodward explains:

Over the years I’ve canvassed hundreds of sources for new business techniques aligned to all my experiences in the large corporate world of [Rank] Xerox and the small-business world of my leasing company. Now it was a case of finding what would work best for England rugby. In our very first meeting I told Humphrey about Paddi and his different approach to business. [1, p. 189]

At this meeting, Walters proposed a ‘team effectiveness workshop’ for the coaching and support staff involving four steps:

‘Firstly we’ll identify what we’re all trying to achieve, and secondly we’ll establish some ground rules for how the team communicate with each other. Thirdly we’ll facilitate discussions amongst the group about everyone’s role descriptions, their expected outputs, as seen by others, and each individual’s critical action steps in the months ahead. Lastly we’ll move into the visioning section of the workshop. Here we’ll examine every aspect of the player experience in relation to their role in England rugby. You have a distinct problem. As a manager you have a workforce over which you have no control. If you want more from the players, you first have to give them good reasons why they would want to put in the extra effort.’ [1, p. 190]

The team effectiveness workshop involved thirteen people, ten of whom worked part-time with the team. This was something that did not escape Woodward’s notice:

... I couldn’t help but think that if we were serious about being the best in the world, we couldn’t possibly build an elite squad with part-timers, regardless of how good they were. We were clearly behind our rivals. [1, p. 191]

ATTENTION TO DETAILS

One of the part-timers employed by the Rugby Football Union (RFU) was Roger Uttley, who ironically had suggested to Woodward that he contact Walters [1, p. 186]:

Roger Uttley had been appointed manager of the England side to work in conjunction with myself as coach. It was a model that been in place for many, many years but, taking nothing away from the excellent job Roger was doing, it was clearly outdated in the new world of professional rugby. ... To work around that, Roger and I had agreed that my job was everything to do with the team, both on the pitch and in the meeting room, and his responsibility was managing everything else. But there were a myriad critical details surrounding Test week and international matches. It was a huge job for someone part-time, and I learned that the smallest of

oversights could have dire consequences. It would soon become clear that this was another area I'd need to manage carefully if we were serious about building a successful high-performance team. [1, p. 186-187]

Uttley and Woodward clashed over administrative issues, such as transportation. Kervin remarks that Woodward "yearned to work with people who had the same eagerness to succeed and the same sense of perfectionism as he had" (p. 208) and explains his conflict with Uttley in terms of the fact that Woodward viewed "managing England and being the head coach of England as seamless" (p. 212):

What [Woodward] needed was a sharp administrator and organiser to pick up the pieces around him and make sure that his management strategy was implemented effectively. Added to the confusion about job rules was the fact that the two men were vastly different personalities. Uttley had been England coach before, and he had a sense of what the job entailed. Clive wanted to throw the rulebook out of the window and start all over again. They wanted different things, they had different views, and they were effectively doing the same job. Clive was full-time, so he took the principal role and Uttley was left with the rest. Clive wanted every detail attended to, so Uttley found himself submerged in dealing with what he felt were the petty obsessions of the new coach. (p. 212-213).

Uttley was eventually sacked by the RFU and his role was filled by Louise Ramsay, who had previously worked for the British Olympic Association on the organisation and planning of the Summer and Winter Olympics. Ramsay is quoted as follows:

'Clive was responsible for everything on the pitch and I was responsible for everything off it. I felt we worked well together from the start. ... I never felt that Clive was over-demanding because he had a very clear vision and explained exactly what he wanted. We all just worked towards it. He's a stickler for detail but so he should be. I thought that was a very positive attribute. I'm a stickler for detail as well.' (p. 214)

CREATING AN ELITE ENVIRONMENT

Woodward believes in creating the right environment for the players and for the England team "his concept of 'right' was entirely dictated by the needs and wants of the players" (p. 235):

'The players were always consulted,' says [Martin] Johnson. 'Clive would ask me what the players thought at every stage. If players thought they would benefit from a particular coach being brought in, that coach would soon appear.' (p. 235)

A document known as the 'bible' was produced:

The purpose of the 'bible' was to put into words the discussions and thought processes of the England team and management. It changed as the years passed, reflecting the change in Clive's outlook and his new thinking for the team. On the last page of the booklet, it says, 'Is there anything you would like to see included, amended or improved? Your input is vital – it is your document, your team, your

success.’ One of Clive’s great skills when working with England was to encourage ownership by everyone of everything within their sphere of influence. He was outstandingly good at making everyone well aware of exactly what the aims were, and where the team was heading, while being very specific about individual roles. His mantra was ‘Coaches will coach, managers will manage, medical staff will look after the players, and technical staff will do the technical work. (p. 240)

In his autobiography, Woodward refers to the ‘bible’ as the ‘Black Book of Teamship Rules:’

I think our Black Book is fundamental to coaching. I’d never coach rugby or any other sport without one – in fact I wouldn’t even run a business without one now – and if I had to start again from scratch, it’s the first thing I’d create with the new team. [1, p. 215].

The concept of ‘Teamship’ is one of Woodward’s leadership keys, as he explains:

Teamship can be described as the ability to work together in a team, or as the collective standard of behavior understood by everyone in the team environment. It doesn’t cover our performance standards in the core technical skills of rugby – our Nine High Performance Behaviours – but deals with your skills in interacting as a group. Most leaders dictate performance standards and assume that everyone instinctively understands how they are expected to work and behave in the team environment. ... My job as the leader is to identify areas of our organisation that are critical to our success, but then it is vital that the people responsible for acting in these areas should establish their own standards. [1, p. 309-310]

Kervin describes the level of detail as “staggering” (p. 241) and that the “purpose of the ‘bible’ was to ensure that the players understood the level of detail needed to make it to the top” (p. 242); for example:

You wouldn’t imagine that the players would need help with ‘proper use of the sauna’ but apparently there was a correct way to do it.’ ‘First, take a warm shower but leave your hair dry. Next, sit on the lower level of the sauna for 2-3 minutes. After this, move up to the top level (lie down if you can) and stay up there for 6-7 minutes. After this, take a cool shower for 30-40 seconds, then alternate with a warm shower for a few minutes. Repeat the shower sequence 4-5 times.’ (p. 241-242)

CONTROL

The concept of ‘control’ is invoked in a number of different ways throughout Kervin’s biography of Woodward:

- Locus of
 - ‘Most successful people have a belief that they are in control of their own destiny. They feel that it is they who will decide what they do.’ (p. 50, quoting Adrian Atkinson)
- Controlling the Controllables
 - A great coach controls all the controllables and Clive asserted that far more was controllable than had ever been imagined before. (p. 341)

- Access to Players

Clive's report [to the RFU] identified a lot of problems that he felt needed remedied before the 2003 World Cup. ... He highlighted problems that were out of his control – player access... (p. 232)

- Of Coaches

Clive had begun to think of the ways in which he could remodel England rugby, as he had his own business. One of the problems was that Clive had control of neither the coaches (all part-time) nor the players (the leading clubs 'owned' the players because they paid them). (p. 189)

- Of Players

'[The England players' strike in mid-November 2000] was an important moment in the players' relationship with Clive,' says [Martin] Johnson. 'If you look at the results, we hardly lost a game after that. When we called off the strike, the relationship with Clive was slightly different. He realized we had strong views and weren't afraid to exercise our powers. It was actually much easier. The squad were much closer and Clive was more onside. It was less teacher-pupil.' (p. 251)

- Training Environment

Clive had been told that he would in control of 'when and where' his England training days would be... (p. 283)

- Of Selection

'Clive never liked to take whole sessions on his own – he liked lots of people to be involved. I think he was pleased when I stepped in to help with the forwards.' ... When it came to selection, though, Clive was clear that it was he, and no one else, who was in charge. 'He wasn't a great one for having a ten-man selection panel or anything,' says [Nigel] Dudding. 'It was always his decision.' (p. 143)

The following statement from Woodward's autobiography echoes what Pete Carroll demanded from the athletic director at the University of Southern California when he took on the post of Head Football Coach (see [4]):

My relationship with the RFU had changed over the years since Francis Baron had been appointed CEO. Francis and I had developed a very successful system for managing the expenditure and improvements in the England team. We had worked out a very clear set of guidelines for managing the elite squad, and I was free to operate anywhere within those guidelines with complete control over how I accomplished my aims. Francis got out of my way and let me do my job in the best way I knew how. [1, p. 354]

After leaving the RFU, Woodward met with Ron Dennis, the chairman and CEO of McLaren Racing:

We had a long conversation about high performance and the similarities that we faced in our sports. I discussed with Ron the system that the England players worked within, compared to their leading rivals, stressing the major difference is that they actually worked for their clubs and not the England team. He understood the implications immediately. He said that my players were 'not body and soul.' He told me that his drivers were highly paid, but they gave body and soul to McLaren. Anything they do, and he means anything, including commercial or media deals, are

only entered into with Ron Dennis's agreement. Simply put – you cannot hope to be the best in the world at anything you do unless you have full control of all facets that go into creating that success. [1, p. 425]

INSPIRATION AND IDEAS

The meeting with Ron Dennis is one of many ways in which Clive Woodward has sought out and learned from successful people in other domains of sport and business. A year after taking up the post of England coach, he visited American football coaches in Colorado and saw, for example, how the head coach of the Denver Broncos delegated to specialist coaches (p. 17). He was also strongly influenced by the Australian Institute of Sport and how 'best practices' were shared across sports (p. 128). Kervin traces this motivation to learn back to his student days at Loughborough University and quotes Lord Sebastian Coe, who was a student at the same time as Woodward:

'He was very inquisitive and it was not unusual to see him watching the weight training and circuit training that athletes did. I'm not surprised by what he has achieved. There's an expression that a lot of people use about Clive and it's my experience of him too – he's always had an obsession with detail.' (p. 73)

Kervin notes that Woodward "had plenty of great ideas and a few that the more down-to-earth members of the squad, including Martin Johnson, thought slightly barmy" (p. 194). Consider, for example, how Woodward travelled to Israel to meet Yehudi Shinar, an expert in 'leadership and skills in high-performance individuals,' who had designed "a computer programme to assess an individual's ability to perform under high levels of pressure and stress" (p. 195):

'It all sounded great. Then when Clive turned up with this bloke and his Mossad system, it was like a computer game,' recalls [Martin] Johnson. 'There was a joystick and you had to line up all these targets and fire things and line things up. The younger players were better than anyone else straightaway because they were used to using a joystick and playing games like that. The management team were hopeless at it because they hadn't played computer games. 'At one point Clive said, "The results of this exercise may determine who gets selected for the team." At that point, we thought Clive had completely lost it. There were lots of moments like that, when we thought he'd lost all sense, but I think it was just enthusiasm – he'd say these things because he was so excited by this new gadget or that new idea. From a player's point of view, though, we'd believe everything he said. In this case, we used the programme for a couple of months, then never saw it again. (p. 195).

MOTIVATION, SELF-BELIEF AND WILLINGNESS TO FAIL

Martin Johnson refers to Woodward's "barmy ideas," but also his competitiveness in noting that, "Clive and I weren't that similar. We always got on because we both wanted to win and that's what made the relationship work when I did become captain" (p. 197). Woodward's concept of winning wasn't just about rugby and was something he regarded as a mindset and culture:

Winning is more than just points on the scoreboard, or performance on the pitch. If we didn't achieve excellence in every area of our efforts as an organisation, then we weren't really winning. [1, p. 101; see also p. 412-415].

Drawing on the work of Roberts [5], Kervin notes that two of the key attributes needed for a great leader are “self-belief” and “an ability to persuade other people that what you believe is right and should be followed unquestioningly and unfailingly” (p. 345). Kervin emphasizes Woodward’s self-belief:

One thing that is consistent in the Clive Woodward story is his almighty self-belief. It was justified when he coached England, but the interesting thing is that the self-belief was there long before the victories and it remained when the victorious phase had passed. It is as if self-belief is a personality trait rather than something that develops with experience and success. It lies deep within the man’s character and is not thrown or disturbed by the flux of real events. After the Lions had lost the first Test, he believed they would win 2-1. Few could understand how we remained so confident, so convinced that the Lions would come back in some way. (p. 302)

Allied with this self-belief is an absence of the need to avoid failure:

If you are directed by the need to avoid failure, you become risk averse and predictable – the two enemies of success. The willingness to fail, upset people or make himself look ridiculous in the pursuit of victory is a key part of Clive’s make-up... . Clive took huge risks, as player, coach and businessman. He played out his tenure as England coach like a man who wasn’t afraid of anything. He says he learnt more from the failures than he did from the victories. He was risk-embracing and even under the most pounding criticism, he stayed true to his beliefs. Sure, defeat hurt but he didn’t ever believe that the failures made *him* a failure. (p. 18)

This reference to the fact that Woodward “stayed true to his beliefs” can be compared to Pete Carroll’s core belief, “be true to the self you know yourself to be” [6, p. 324] (see also [4, p. iv]). With regard to getting others to believe in what he was doing, Kervin argues that:

Clive made the England players believe that they could be the greatest team in the world, which is the first step in actually becoming the greatest team in the world. He managed not only to have unshakeable belief but to share it and convince others that if they followed him, he would lead them to World Cup glory. Then came the [British and Irish] Lions. It was significantly easier for Clive to convince the Lions that they would win in New Zealand because he had a track record of delivering on his promises. Everyone believed in him – the players, the coaches and the public. That is why the defeats hit so hard. Perhaps that also explains why he was able to make so many peculiar selection decisions, apparently unchallenged by anyone in his extensive team of coaches. (p. 346)

Kervin goes only so far with trait or ‘great man’ theories of leadership, however. In the end, she recognises that Woodward, like any coach, “needs to be completely focused to achieve and that he needs time with players” and concedes that the Lion’s Tour showed that “great teams that have been together for three years tend to triumph over teams that have been together for three weeks” (p. 305).

SYNOPSIS

Alison Kervin’s well-researched and insightful biography of a high-profile coach, Clive

Woodward, provides a useful resource for students of sports science and coaching, who can use this book alongside the Woodward’s autobiography [1] for case study work on leadership and management in sport. It is particularly valuable for those who are examining the extent to which the guidelines for building elite teams in sport are generic.

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