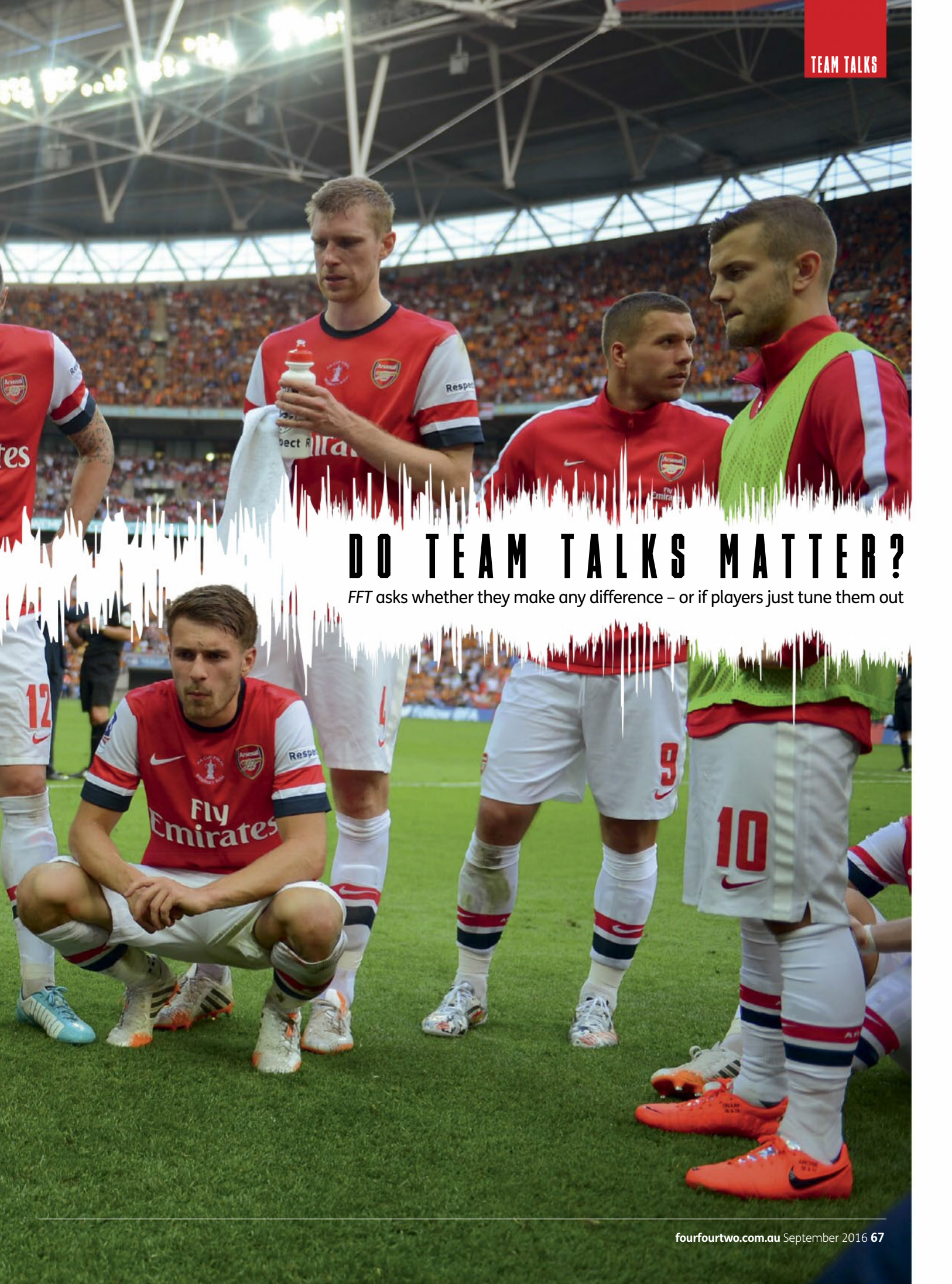




DO TEAM TALKS MATTER?

FFT asks whether they make any difference – or if players just tune them out



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hristmas Day 2008 is a day Ian Ashbee struggles to remember. Like squinting through a windshield smeared with Vegemite, the eight years in between have rendered his memory a bit dark and misty. "I guess it was like everybody else's," Ashbee tells *FourFourTwo*. "Presents. Go for a walk. Dinner. Queen's Speech. *Only Fools and Horses*."

Back in '08, Ashbee was captain of Hull City and, while he fails to recollect what Santa left under the tree ("I dunno – a road bike, maybe?"), the

then-midfield maestro can fondly recall having the day off. It was a timely festive treat from the Tigers' manager, Phil Brown.

With 20 points from their first nine games, Hull had bucked the trend of newly-promoted clubs propping up the league table, confounding the bookies who had pegged them as \$1.30 favourites for relegation. In Brown, Hull had a fresh-faced (if suspiciously suntanned-faced), coach who'd studied at the Sam Allardyce School of Science.

Following stints as Big Sam's assistant at Blackpool and Bolton, where the duo spiced stats and eminent tech with football at a time when Opta Joe was barely on solids, Brown ended Hull's 104-year wait for top-flight football after just 18 months in the dugout. That September, he was Premier League Manager of the Month.

For Ashbee, while Christmas Day recollections are pretty hazy, his memory of the following afternoon is in glorious Technicolor. As the overachieving Tigers (sixth) clashed with Manchester City's ailing superstars (18th) at the Etihad, the Premier League's scriptwriters threw up a dramatic plot twist: Hull were trailing by four at the break. Crestfallen, Ashbee & Co. headed for the tunnel. From the touchline, however, Phil Brown's voice thundered back at them, calling the players back to the pitch. He had other ideas.

If you ever find yourself questioning whether romance in football is truly dead, then spare a thought for the team talk.

Encased in tradition, steeped in folklore and blanketed by secrecy so watertight that footballers take a vow of silence that's still active decades later, this 15-minute respite between halves is not about players catching their breath, chewing orange segments or taking on some fluids. Oh no. Half-time is a symbol for hope.

In a mystical no-man's-land that exists in the sweet spot between first-half action and the final result, the dressing room is like a toddler's playroom – a place where anything could happen. Men become gods. Zero points are upgraded to three. Every victory is worthy of its own commemorative Blu-ray. Of these wonders, each is unlocked via the stirring rallying cry of a manager's vocal cords – as they magic and wow and will their team to success in the second period.

Or at least that's what it's like in our heads. In reality, though, how much difference do team talks really make? Is barking platitudes to gee up players overblown in its importance? Or are these snapshot orations what truly separates teams from death or glory?

"One hundred per cent, one hundred per cent," says Brad Burton. A 43-year-old bald ball of energy, and former pizza deliveryman, Burton traded in a career in deep dish and dole cheques for a job as a motivational speaker. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, he swears that words have the power to affect everything.

"I think a motivational speaker is someone that gets beyond all the bulls**t and talks directly to someone's psyche. It's their job to give people belief. Take boxing. If you came in after a bad round and your corner man said: 'F**k me, you got a good hiding there, it's not looking good for you...' DING! DING! You wouldn't be instilled with much confidence. But whether it's temporary or sustainable, you can absolutely bring the best out of someone."

Not everyone agrees. "I think the first thing to do is to shatter the illusion," offers Professor Damian Hughes, a psychologist whose 2014 book *How to Think Like Sir Alex Ferguson* drilled into the psyche of one of football's most revered, and feared, conversationalists.



While he admits that "done well, they can change a game", Hughes is quick to draw a chunky line between real world speeches and those from our DVD collection. "We can overestimate the importance of them, and Hollywood perpetuates it," adds Hughes. "We watch films like *Any Given Sunday*, where you have Al Pacino talking about 'one inch at a time'. It's nonsense. In the environments I've been in, if a coach started talking like that, players would laugh at them.

"The best team talks are about delivering clear, succinct information, getting it over in the simplest terms and doing it in a calm way. This is football, not *Dead Poets Society*."

Any manager studying a UEFA Pro Licence will sit through an entire module dedicated to communication, deemed as important to a coach's craft as tactical understanding and commanding a club's finances. It figures, given that each domestic season will see coaches blather on in the dressing room for nine and a half hours – and that's just at half-time. Arsene Wenger, who notched his 1,000th match in charge of Arsenal, against Chelsea, in 2014, has now spent more than 10 days talking tactics in the interval. The things Gunnersaurus must have seen...

But unlike many footballing relics, such as pre-match drams of whiskey or a Marlboro habit, team talks have not just remained a facet of the sport – they have evolved alongside it. Today, team talks are becoming

a more collaborative affair, combining the knowledge of the club's analysis department with a bit of Hollywood glitter. Once just a schmaltzy staple of end-of-season dinners, montages of a team's successes, strong tackles and barnstorming finishes are now routinely cut together and broadcast to inspire players and boost togetherness.

Some coaches don't stop there. Prior to the 2009 Champions League Final, Pep Guardiola mixed clips from Barcelona games with scenes from *Gladiator*, screening it to the team the night before the match. "Players came out of the room crying, in a heightened state of emotion," says Hughes. Barça then claimed a 2-0 win at Rome's Stadio Olimpico over Alex Ferguson's Manchester United.

And yet tugging at a squad's heartstrings or brain fibres can represent a high-stakes game of Chicken. Indeed, for every Fergie placing names in an envelope of the title-winning Manchester United players that he thought would grow complacent, goading his side to another league crown (only there weren't any names after all, were there?), there's a Brendan Rodgers scribbling names of the three Liverpool pros "that will let us down this year" – despite having just met them – before the Reds spluttered to a seventh-place finish.

According to Prof Hughes, Louis van Gaal once estimated that elite team talks can add an additional 10 per cent to a team's performance. But in any system there's



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always an outlier, and it's fitting that the man transcending the facts to cement himself as a verbal vigilante (even if he's known as a dour Scotsman who would freely launch a size 10 at a player's skull, or wet their brow with the hot spittle of his 'hairdryer') is the same one whose shadow Van Gaal couldn't quite shake. Ferguson's team talks weren't just reserved for puce-faced fury. He was also a master of the spoken word.

At half-time during the 1999 Champions League Final, when Manchester United were 1-0 down to Bayern Munich, Fergie opted against an abusive tirade, instead retelling a story he had heard from a fellow Scot, Steve Archibald. The former Barcelona striker had expressed his anguish at walking past the European Cup as a runner-up in 1986 and not being permitted to touch it. Ferguson passed this on to his team, in turn creating “cognitive dissonance”, according to Hughes.

While Hughes says Ferguson is “a great storyteller”, it would appear he's also an expert in the art of saying very little. When asked how many words a great coach should speak to his players, if the average coach said 100, Ferguson replied: “Ten words. Even fewer if possible.” A classic example of this is a team talk that prefaced a match against Spurs, retold by Roy Keane in his autobiography. It went: “Lads, it's Tottenham.” United won 3-0.

Conversely, while tales of the eccentric icon Brian Clough will never be forgotten (punching a young striker in the gut for showboating, blowing tobacco smoke in a player's face as he knew they'd perform better if irritated...), modern psychology and practice suggest that the iron fist approach is fading.

“Fear just doesn't work,” asserts Hughes. “We like the illusion of it, because that's what sells newspapers, but the reality is that people switch off. If somebody's shouting at you, then you go into a fight-or-flight response, meaning you either keep your head down and hope the fury abates, or you go on the front foot and start blaming others. So, screaming, shouting and throwing tea cups around? No.”

But are swears, antagonistic rants on their way out, or is it in fact just kicking off behind closed doors? On the very rare occasions TV cameras have breached the closed-door policy, the results have been explosive.

In 1995, Neil Warnock invited an audience to breathe the Huddersfield dressing room's musky air. This air turned blue, as Warnock spontaneously combusted before his players' eyes. The foul-mouthed onslaught included the zinger, “You? You're in f**king Latvia!”

Yet Warnock's bollocking doesn't come close to the one launched by John Sitton, who starred in Channel 4's *Leyton Orient: Yours for a Fiver* documentary that same year. Earning his place in the pantheon of irate (teetering on sociopathic) managers, Sitton decided the

best way to remedy a 1-0 deficit at home to Blackpool was to sack defender Terry Howard at half-time, empty the dictionary of expletives and present two more players with the offer of a scrap. Sitton finished with the now-immortal words: “And you can pair up if you like... and you can bring your f**king dinner. By the time I've finished with you, you'll f**king need it.” He now drives a black cab.

On Boxing Day, 2008, the Hull City players sat down sheepishly in the penalty box next to the Etihad's away end. Phil Brown clapped the Tigers' travelling support – his way of apologising for what he thought had been a scandalous first-half performance – before squatting to commit the cardinal sin of team talks: he let the whole world watch.

“Was it a bad team talk?” Brown wonders aloud to *FFT*, shortly after a pre-season training session in Southend, where he is now manager. “I don't know. It was an infamous one, shall we say. Could it have turned into a 4-4 draw? Well, that is what I was trying for.” Brown claims to remember every single word he said that day – they are crystallised in his mind – yet stops short of repeating them. “There were a few swear words in there,” he says. “I couldn't repeat it.”

Offering his analytical eye, Hughes pinpoints Brown's most famous moment as a classic example of how not to perform a team talk, before *FFT* even mentions it. Brown isolated his team, Hughes says. Exposed them. Left them feeling humiliated. The psychological toll on their emotions meant that they couldn't perform even if they wanted to.

As it happened, Hull lost 5-1 that day. While they technically drew the second half of the match 1-1, the Tigers then registered just one victory in the second half of the league campaign (and that was won in stoppage time), and barely survived on the final day. The following season, Phil Brown was relieved of his duties in March. Hull were relegated in May.

“I didn't think it was right that he sat us down on the pitch,” says Ian Ashbee of that fateful day. “We're grown men. Yes, we'd had a bad day at the office, but let's be realistic: we were sixth in the Premier League after half a season. Did we warrant being sat down on the pitch and ridiculed? I don't think so.”

For his part, while Brown feels he is still judged by those fateful minutes at the Etihad, he insists that he has no regrets.

“No, no,” he says, with a smile. “I would never ever change anything that I've done, and I mean that sincerely. I was in control of the changing room, and I exposed it. I think that's the only regret I have – that I chose to expose the changing room. But I don't have any regrets about doing it. Not at all.”

'The Five STEPS to a Winning Mindset', by Damian Hughes, is out now. (RRP \$29.99)

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