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Blue Jays' new department swings focus to mental side of the game

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Angus Mugford, hired in December as the first-ever director of high performance for the Toronto Blue Jays, admits that when he was growing up in Britain, he did not watch sports the same way his friends did.

They were consumed by the final result of the soccer or rugby game they had gathered to watch. Mugford, meanwhile, was increasingly captivated by the mental factors that help propel athletes to greatness.

Mugford said that interest was first stoked in 1990, watching soccer's World Cup in Italy, where England suffered an agonizing loss to West Germany in a semi-final. The game was decided on penalty kicks and England's fate was sealed after its final two shooters were unsuccessful on their point-blank attempts, the final opportunity by Chris Waddle sailing over the crossbar.

"I was a frustrated fan along with the rest of the country [over the outcome]," Mugford said. "But I was also left amazed with the fact that here you had two great players, both physically and technically gifted, unable to come through when it most mattered. That fascinated me, and I wanted to know more: What was going on in those players' minds with the game on the line? Can you change it? Can you train for it?"

Mugford was 13 at the time, and he would go on to become a sports psychologist, earning his doctorate from the University of Kansas in 2004 after moving to the United States.

With the Blue Jays, he will get an opportunity to pursue his theories on what exactly makes a high-performance athlete tick as the lead of a newly created department created by Mark Shapiro, the American League club's newly minted president and chief executive officer.

Shapiro had a multitude of issues to deal with when he left the Cleveland Indians to join the Blue Jays at the end of the 2015 baseball season. They included the hiring of Ross Atkins as the team's new general manager to replace Alex Anthopoulos.

Shapiro said the new department will cater to the players' mental and physical needs as a top priority toward his goal of providing the Blue Jays all the tools available to try to maintain a competitive edge.

"Players are at the centre of everything that we are trying to do. So we have a model where every single thing we do revolves around helping those players reach their potential," Shapiro said.

"And if we have one person [Mugford] outside of the fundamental [baseball] side oversee all the areas of opportunity there – largely strength-and-conditioning, medical services, mental performance and sports science – we think it could help us gain a competitive advantage."

For the last 12 years, Mugford has been employed at IMG Academy, an elite private educational and sports-training facility in Bradenton, Fla.

Mugford, now 39, started at IMG as a "mental coach" for the students. Ultimately, he was named the director of the IMG Institute, a branch of the academy that made the school's mental performance and leadership programs available to outside clients.

One of Shapiro's sons attended the academy, and it was there he first got to know Mugford and was impressed by what he had to offer.

Mugford has authored or co-authored dozens of academic papers relating to the psychology of high performance, not only as it relates to sports but to other walks of life.

One of his papers examined the high-performance teams that work closely in concert in hospital emergency wards. Mugford's wife is an emergency-room physician.

Through IMG, Mugford also provided mental training for U.S. Special Operations Forces, including Navy SEALs and Green Berets. Their members tackle only the most difficult military operations, and the ability to perform and ultimately succeed under pressure has far more serious ramifications than anything that ever transpires in the world of sports.

"Even though the consequences are far greater – we are talking life and death – there are a number of similarities between being a soldier and a high-performance athlete," Mugford said. "They both have to perform under pressure and be masters of their skills. You have to be motivated, able to deal with adversity, interact and work successfully in a team environment. All of those skills are consistent."

With the Blue Jays, Mugford will head a team of specialists in sports medicine and science that already exists in part – George Poulis will continue as the team's head trainer, and Chris Joyner remains as the strength-and-conditioning co-ordinator.

Mugford said he also plans on hiring another psychologist, an expert in sports science, and, down the road, a nutritionist.

“This is not just the mental side of things,” Shapiro said of the new department. “This is ‘How do we help guys stay on the field? How do we help them perform at their peak through the ups and downs of the season, help them understand recovery and maximize recovery, and help us keep the right players in the field at the right time? How do we help them deal with distraction?’ It’s just taking a really holistic, integrated approach to helping a player be as good as he possibly can.”

Mugford said that the players will be subjected to psychological profiles when they arrive at Dunedin in February for the start of spring training.

But he does not want to perpetuate the cliché that the athletes will all be called individually into a private office, laid down on a leather couch, and be expected to pour their hearts out to an analyst taking notes on a steno pad.

“I think really it’s much bigger than that,” he said. “I think that we’re looking to help develop profiles on players period so they understand themselves in how they click physically and mentally as players and as people.

“This isn’t necessarily sitting down in an office. I think these are just regular conversations that we have, both with the coaching staff and with players, in really helping them understand how they think, how they want to deal with situations and how they learn.”

“Again, it’s not us having the magic answers. It’s helping players be more aware and learn who they are and how they work.”

The pressure for professional athletes to perform these days has never been greater. Television captures every moment, both failure and success, and replays it to vast audiences over and over. And the money paid to the top athletes is astronomical.

It will be Mugford’s task to help the players overcome any uncertainties they have in order to consistently perform to the best of their abilities – and, presumably, to win consistently, too.

“I think the key part is understanding that the margins of winning and losing are so small,” Mugford said. “There are many instances where you could look back at one play, one pitch, one event that could have meant everything. So that’s the key: What are the little things? Are they going to make a difference?”

Mugford said he hopes a lot of his work with the players will be pro-active, helping them better understand the mental processes they go through in preparing for competition.

“And rather than just wait for things to go wrong, look at what are their habits and things that help them be successful,” he said. “That way they can be more consciously aware of what they’re doing well and hopefully they’ll be able to do that more consistently.”

Mugford said that even when the game is on the line, the successful athlete does not ultimately think in those terms. It is about how to better deal with the adversity they are facing.

“When you’re going down the stretch and winning and losing becomes a bigger focus or distraction, the top athletes are able to come back to basics,” he said. “And ultimately that’s one of the things, coming back to the military, that they do so well.

“When it is a matter of life and death, they actually don’t think about it being life or death. They focus on the process of what it takes to be successful. And they’re so well trained in that that it’s not about rising to the occasion. They are able to fall back to the level of their training.”

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